

ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

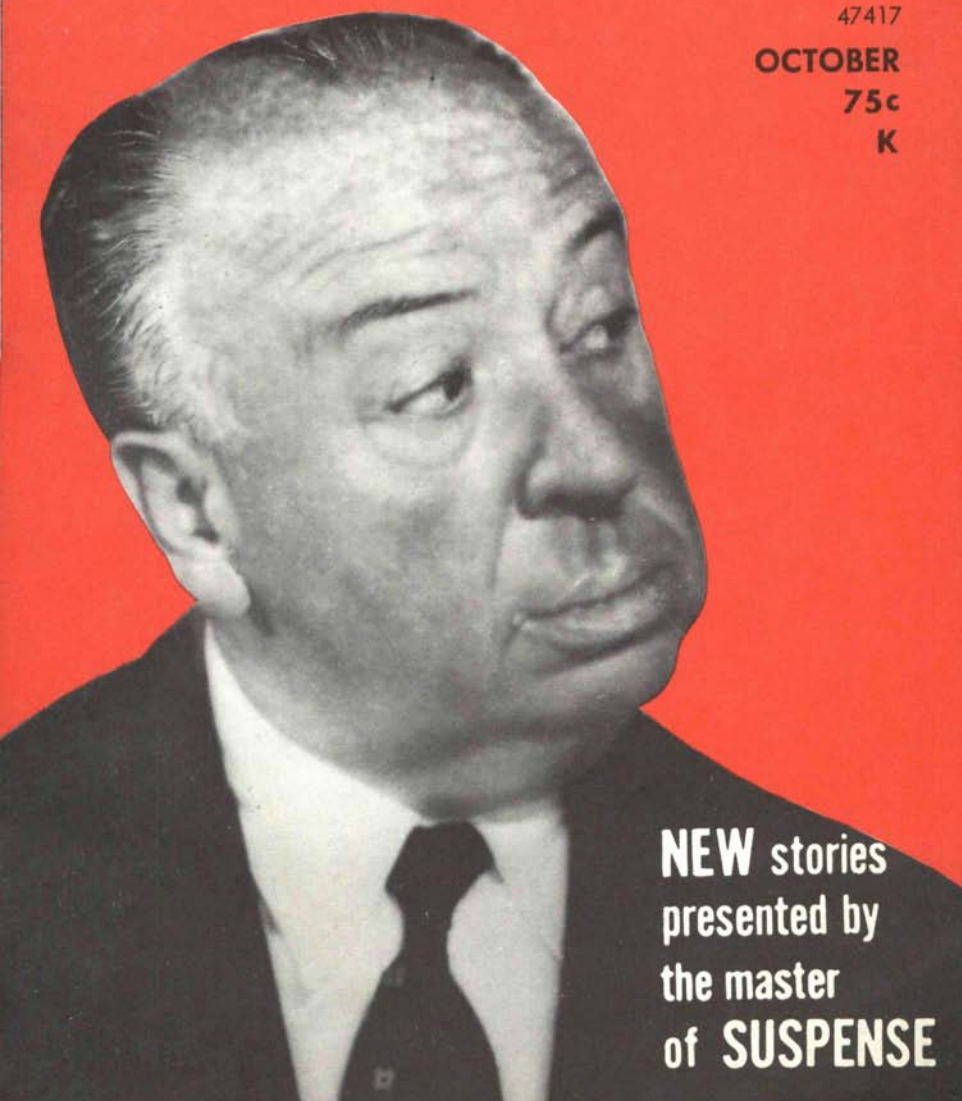
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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OCTOBER

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NEW stories
presented by
the master
of **SUSPENSE**

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October 1972

Dear Reader:

As autumn leaves fall, so too in mystery fiction do bodies, though with much greater regularity—and who would have it otherwise? So you should be happy to learn that this month's all-new selections offer no surcease. Mystery writers are merciless, and herein many of your old favorites are up to their new tricks.

Indeed, if a contest were held for best-looking corpse, who would win? These authors enter an awesome lineup of contestants, from the bizarre story of *Murder Door to Door* by Robert Colby to the suspense-filled novelette *A Small Price to Pay* by Stephen Wasylyk.

I would not care to be called upon to decide such an event, even if it were possible to select a single winner, for there could be a contest for deceased judges. Instead, I will leave that to you, since for me there is next month's issue to consider.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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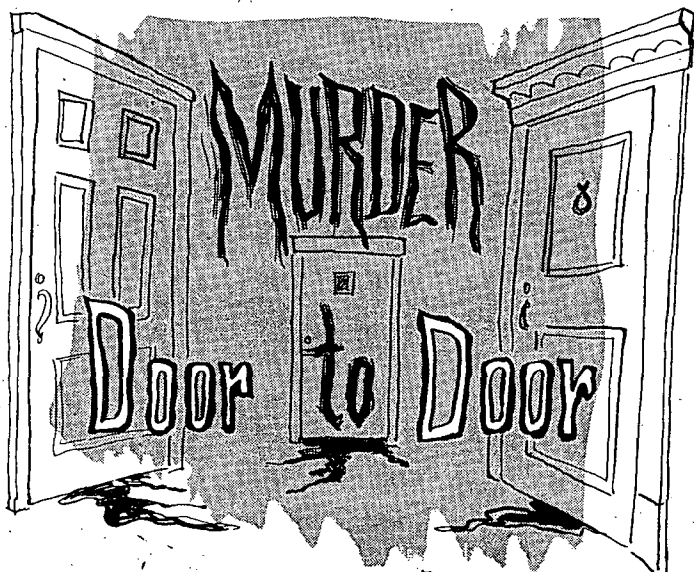
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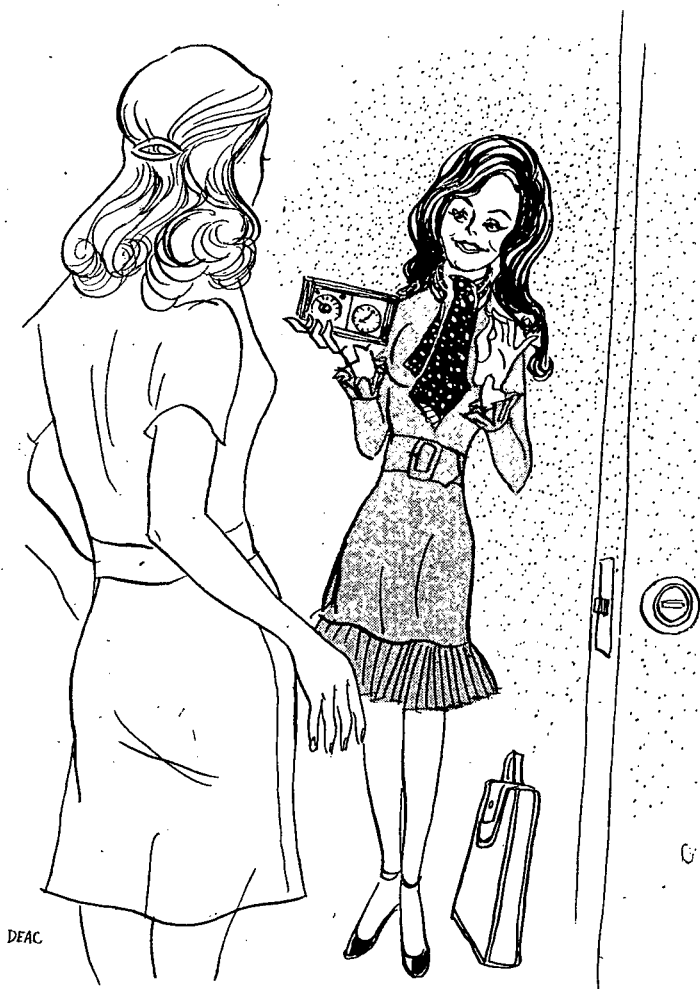
by
*Robert
Colby*

IT WAS NEAR eleven on Monday morning. Judy had just returned from the supermarket to the apartment on Cypress Way in which she lived with her husband. She had married Tom Ralston only seven months before, when he was released from the Army Signal Corps after a tour of duty in Germany.

Tom had persuaded her to quit her job as hostess in a downtown restaurant, but that was a mistake. Now she was lonely and restless

with little to do but rattle around the apartment reading and watching TV until Tom came home for dinner.

Judy, 23, had fine auburn hair, and the pleasant structure of her



DEAC

face was only a little spoiled by an irregular nose and slightly protruding teeth. When she married Tom her figure had been enticingly proportioned. But with the boredom of

idleness she had put on weight, and now there was about her the suggestion of overabundance.

Judy sorted the week's groceries she had bought at the market, stor-

ing meats and other perishables in the refrigerator, placing the remaining items on appropriate shelves. She was adjusting a roll of paper towels on the rack when the bell chimed.

Peering from the spy slot in the front door, Judy observed that her caller was a young woman who was smartly attired in a flame-red jersey dress. She carried an attaché case under her arm, supporting it with a white-gloved hand. Her features were remarkably pretty, and she stood tall and proud, with an air of authority.

Judy opened the door.

"Good morning, dear," said the woman, and then smiled in a way that was charming, yet gave up nothing of herself. "My name is Sheila Newberry," she continued in a voice rich with confidence, "and I've brought you an exquisite gift from Global Electric, the people who make the finest in portable radios." Here she paused, her pink-petal lips parted expectantly, her large, unblinking eyes brightly focused.

"Well, it's a good name—Global Electric," Judy said. "But—"

"I'm not *selling* anything, dear. I'm *promoting* the new Spaceway portable radio. Your husband would be interested, I'm sure."

"Perhaps," said Judy. "But he's at work. Besides, there's no point in

taking up your time. Because I'm afraid we don't have money for luxuries just now."

"Well, how stupid of me, darling! Didn't I make it clear? There's nothing to buy, not a penny to spend. We want to make you a *gift* of one of our little radios. It's strictly a promotional idea. We distribute these new portables to special people here and there, and all we ask in return is that you show the new Spaceway to your friends and tell them where to go and buy one like it."

"Oh, that's quite different," said Judy with a small sigh of relief. "But am-I so special? Why did you choose me?"

Sheila Newberry chuckled delightedly. In mock shame, she daintily covered her face with a gloved hand. "Well, now you've caught me, honey. With my little red face hanging out! No, we pick people at random, more or less. But once you own a Spaceway, you do become very special. Right, dear?"

"Yes, I suppose." Judy laughed good-naturedly. "May I see the radio?"

"Good heavens! Have I been standing here all this time without letting you see the little gem? See it, play it and *have* it. That's the name of the game, darling!" Sheila quickly unfastened her case and poking a hand inside, displayed the

radio, holding it up with a little flourish.

The portable had a shining ebony face with gleaming metal trim. The dial was set with green and gold numerals; beside it there was a tiny jewel of a clock.

"How precious!" Judy said.

"Exactly the word, darling," Sheila agreed. "Perfectly precious! It has both AM and FM, an electric clock to awaken you gently with music, and a telescoping antenna. Yet it's so compact, you could carry it in one of those oversized handbags. And it has a beautiful sound. Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes, I certainly would."

"Fine, dear. If you'll show me where I can plug it in . . ."

"It doesn't play on batteries too?"

"Yes, but they don't provide batteries when it's a gift. Sorry about that." Sheila made a comic face.

Judy stepped back from the doorway. Sheila entered and glanced about. "What a sweet little place. Just the two of you, dear? No children?"

"Well, we've only been married a short time."

"Ahh, I see."

"You'll find an outlet right there below the desk."

Sheila plugged in the radio, set it on the desk and twisted the control

knob. Switching to a variety of stations and sounds, she kept turning to eye Judy. Sheila wore a small, curious smile and altogether her expression now seemed detached from the whole business, as if her attention had shifted abruptly to another center of interest.

The woman had strange eyes, Judy decided. They hinted at some sly purpose larger than the moment.

Though Judy had remained standing, Sheila sank uninvited into a chair, took possession of it. Behind her, the portable belted the room with the unmusic of a rock combo.

She crossed her long-stem legs, encased in the tight clutch of navy-colored, opaque hose. About her neck there was a blue and white kerchief which spilled into the valley of her generous bosom. Deep black hair showered her shoulders, stark against the unblemished skin of her pale, delicate features.

"What's your name, honey?" she said as she constructed a white pyramid of gloved fingers, her tone now more personal, really impertinent.

Judy sat uncertainly on the edge of a facing chair. She wanted to get rid of the woman and keep the radio and do it all gracefully, yet swiftly. Because there was something hostile about Sheila New-

berry that posed a sneaky threat; made her nervous, intimidated her.

"My name is Judy Ralston," she said with a spastic wink of smile, her voice frail behind the unmusical music of the precious radio.

Sheila nodded. "Judy, huh? That's a ridiculous name for a woman. It says nothing, goes nowhere."

"Is that so?" Judy tried to conceal her annoyance. "Well, unfortunately, we don't get to name ourselves when we're born."

Sheila pursed her lips. "And since the day you were born did you ever do anything wild and wicked, something really exciting, Judy? Ha! I'll bet not. You were a good little girl who did what mama and papa told you. And believed all their idiot, middle-class lies about life and how it should be lived purely and decently—and monotonously—in dull, middle-class conformity. And then you married some witless slob with the same lack of imagination—naturally. And so of course you'll die without ever knowing what it was all about. Poor Judy."

Judy compressed her mouth. "Now, listen, that's about enough! I'm not interested in your personal opinion of my—"

"On the other hand," Sheila pushed on with an imperious gesture for silence, "maybe I'm being too hasty. One should never make

snap judgments about people, my dear mother used to say. And mother was *always* right." Sheila nodded judiciously. "Yes, it's possible that behind the drab little housewife there is another Judy hiding, the evil one with the fascinating secrets. And, darling, I'm a compulsive listener. I adore the unmasking of sin and depravity. Tell Sheila all your dark secrets. Show her the naughty-naughty girl squirming to break loose from little Judy twinkle-toes."

Judy stood, smoothing her skirt with tremulous hands. "I want you to leave," she said. "Right now. This instant! I don't understand your game, but it's obvious that you're demented. At the very least you should be kept off the streets and out of the homes of *normal* people. Just go, and don't come back, or you'll have more than me to deal with. Yes, and take your silly radio. I don't want it."

Sheila also stood. "I'm glad you don't want the radio, dear. I had no intention of leaving it. Good heavens, it cost me thirty-two-fifty, plus tax." She groped inside the case, which had been resting on her lap. "But I do have a little gift for you, after all, darling."

She held up a hunting knife, handsomely fashioned with a wide, brilliant blade. "It's an expensive one," she said. "Made of the finest

steel. Isn't it precious? And so practical!

"Now, this time, my sweet, I won't disappoint you. I'm going to let you have this lovely knife. All of it. For keeps!"

The detective sergeant from Homicide, with his partner, stood watching in the hallway as the blanket-draped body of Judy Ralston was carried into the elevator. Newspaper reporters, and news photographers snapping pictures, scurried about. Some squeezed into the car and rode it down, others dashed for the stairs.

The sergeant shook his head solemnly. "You ever see anything like this before, Nate?"

"Nope. Saw a woman who got clobbered by a freight train once. But I think she came out better."

The sergeant puffed his cigarette. "I might make a little sense of this one if rape were involved. But no, Doc says it looks as if the lousy creep just butchered the poor girl. It's an overkill. Probably a vengeance kick. How'd you like to come home for dinner and find that gory thing all sliced up on your bed?"

"I don't think I could handle it, Ben. Not if it was *my* wife."

"Neither could Tom Ralston," said the sergeant. "He just sits and stares. A vegetable."

"Judy Ralston, a lamb to the slaughter."

The sergeant pursed his lips. "Maybe she wasn't such a lamb."

"You think she had something going on the side? A boyfriend?"

The sergeant shrugged. "Possibly. Because the guy didn't break in. Would she invite a stranger? So we'll check it out. But one thing is certain. This boy is a psycho. His type of mutilation you don't get from a sane human being. Yeah, it's gotta be some bird with a scrambled brain. Yet a clever one. Leaves nothing behind. No weapon, no clues."

"We've still got the prints to sift."

The sergeant snorted. "Lots of luck, Nate. If this baby is consistent, none of those prints will be his."

"Then we have just one hope," said Nate. "That little red sports car the manager saw parked out front. It didn't belong to any of the tenants, and it wasn't owned by somebody visiting a tenant. Manager says she knows it was a Triumph because her sister has a green one like it."

The sergeant sneered. "Sure, but she didn't get the tag number. And how many autos like that are in a town this size? It's a mighty slim lead. Just the same, we'll take a close look at everyone who owns a red Triumph sports. And if all the

cards're stacked for us, maybe we'll make it through the list before they turn us out to pasture on retirement."

It was past eleven on the following Friday morning. Sheila Newberry, dubbed in the headline of one newspaper as the *Mad Slasher*, and rightfully known in some quarters as Bobby De Marco, yawned, stretched and slid from the warm luxurious folds of his queen-sized bed.

Bobby pulled an exquisite silk robe over his pajamas. The robe was embellished with intricate oriental designs against a vivid background of Chinese red. Red was his favorite color. Red was vibrant, alive; it suggested the very stuff of which life was made.

The one possession in red that had to go was the little Triumph sports car. The Bobby mind knew that Sheila was a genius, but a genius was still a mortal and should be allowed an occasional goof—and that red car was a bad one.

Some idiot reporter had pointed his nasty finger at the red Triumph; a sneaky implication right on the front page. So that sweet set of wheels would have to be discarded and eventually replaced. Meanwhile, take a bus, take a train—take a walk! But get there, baby, just get there! Right, Sheila?

Bobby eased his pedicured toes into fuzzy slippers. He crossed to a wall of glass and pulled the drape cord. A slanting burst of sun stabbed the room, toasting Bobby's pretty face. Squinting, he gazed across the park that bordered the opulent Glenview section. The park rolled north for long blocks of combed greenery, sprouting massive old trees, great shaggy bushes and splashy decks of flowers; boasting tennis courts, playgrounds and an amphitheater.

A grand place to live, thought Bobby. A divine address! Right, Sheila?

Stirred by the sun, Bobby now assumed a prone position and did a series of push-ups, followed by bending and stretching exercises. Though not in the least depleted by this daily routine, Bobby always quit after only a few minutes. It was imperative to keep that marvelous body sleek and trim. But too much muscle flexing and straining could give one bulging biceps. Well, Sheila, do we want to look like a weight lifter?

In the bathroom, Bobby shaved the minor stubble of blond hairs with fussy attention, inspecting the velvet skin minutely under the magnification of a hand mirror.

Next he brushed the small, matching pearls of teeth energetically; showered, sprayed cologne,

and dabbed perfume. Then, still wearing his robe but protecting it with a ruffle-edged, gaudy-print apron, he fixed a Spartan breakfast. It was a meal devoid of those high-caloried goodies that would tend to make Sheila plump or flabby.

Afterward, Bobby sat with petrified stillness in a livingroom chair. Head slightly bowed, eyes closed, his gaze turned inward and fastened upon the vista of himself. Bright images of thought, both violent and sensual, were projected upon the dark wall of his mind. They were like capsule dramas, complete with sound. Especially a sound of voices. And a distant screaming.

With the images came the unbearable hunger, and he knew it was time to move again. The hunger, too many years contained, was now beyond endurance; and for that hunger, another temptress had to be sacrificed, had to be punished.

Bobby unlocked Sheila's special closet and inspected the tidy row of costly dresses with a practiced eye. No, for this occasion, a suit—the beige knitted one. Yes, and the green jacket with matching gloves. Just lovely. Perfect!

Studying himself in the mirror of a vanity, Bobby completed the Sheila look with a black wig over the blond hair, and selected items from an enviable assortment of the most expensive cosmetics. Few

women could equal his judgment in the art of makeup. Too much and it would be a burlesque, a caricature of Sheila. Too little, and the shadow of Bobby might be detected behind the mask of Sheila.

When it was done, there was only Sheila—body and soul. In the full-length mirror, Sheila smiled and winked, and declared herself utterly feminine and delightful.

From a shelf, Sheila removed the attaché case and the precious portable radio. Then, from the sealed drawer of a desk, came the cunning knife of the hunter, its remorseless blade appearing freshly scrubbed, looking cool and surgical.

With these clever tools of entrapment and dissection closed inside her case, Sheila donned her jacket and gloves and departed in search of a second victim.

Susan Brundy, a petite young blonde wearing a mini-dress and knee-length boots, walked briskly up Grand Boulevard from the shopping center and turned into Logan Street. In the gleaming daylight of early afternoon, it never occurred to Susan that anyone might be following her, certainly not a woman. So when she entered her half of the duplex house on Logan, she didn't notice Sheila watching her covertly from the corner.

Susan had just settled into a chair

and was reading the newspaper she had bought when the doorbell rang. She tossed the paper aside and went to answer.

The caller appeared to Susan to be a woman in her late twenties. A beige knitted suit embraced her striking figure. Over it she wore a green jacket with matching gloves. Her long black hair was startling in contrast to the pale skin of her dainty face. She had long lashes and large, extraordinary eyes which, like the full pink mouth, seemed faintly mocking.

Susan spotted the tan leather attaché case and was immediately prepared for a sales pitch.

"Good afternoon, dear," said the woman, and flashed a neon smile. "My name is Sheila Newberry and I'm with Global Electric, the people who make Spaceway portable radios, the very latest and the finest in the world. Oh, my—I can see that I've lost you already. Well, don't rush off, because I'm not *selling* anything, dear. I'm *giving* away several of these lovely portables as part of our campaign to promote this new product in the community."

Sheila Newberry reached into her case and produced the radio, holding it aloft dramatically. "There!" she said. "How do you like it? Isn't it precious?"

Susan nodded. "Yes, but there's a

gimmick somewhere, that's for sure."

"No gimmicks, darling. I'm going to play the radio for you and show you all the clever built-in gadgets it has, extras you'll never find in any other portable so tiny. And if you're completely sold on the marvels of this fantastic portable, would you be willing to show it around to all your friends and urge them to buy one like it? Because you see, dear, that's the whole point—to spread the good word about Spaceway."

"Well, I knew there had to be *some* catch to it," said Susan. "But it's not much to ask and if you're sure it won't cost me anything, I'll be glad to give the radio a boost to everyone I know. I'll even mention your name."

"Oh, would you! How terribly sweet! Just tell your friends to say, 'Sheila Newberry sent me,' when they buy at the store. Right? And now, since the gift portables don't come with batteries, we'll have to plug yours in somewhere if we're going to demonstrate it. Won't we, dear?"

"I see. Yes, of course. Well, then, won't you come in, Miss Newberry?"

They went inside and vanished behind the door. Some forty-five minutes later, still chic and poised, clothing fresh and spotless but for certain rusty stains on the green

gloves now concealed in the attaché case, Sheila Newberry reappeared on the walk outside the duplex, and clipped along Logan Street. With the luck of the devil, a block east on Grand Boulevard, Sheila caught a bus in a matter of seconds.

A few days later and a few miles removed, Sheila was again tempted. And the third "temptress" was still more savagely "punished." Sacrificed to the god of Sheila's strange hunger was a 24-year-old night-trick nurse, slashed to death in her apartment. There were no suspects and no clues—not even a little red Triumph.

The nurse was Louise Hemming. A single girl living alone, she was easily the most attractive of the three victims. And as if to bewilder further the swelling number of police, criminologists and psychiatrists assigned to unravel the case—she had been raped.

On the night of the Louise Hemming murder, Bobby De Marco's headline performance at the *Cherchez La Femme* was not up to its usual standard of excellence. Bobby had been drinking relentlessly between shows. The ceaseless barrage from the news media, full of outrage and panic over the third butchery of sweet innocence, had

shattered his cool, smirking bravado.

The *Cherchez La Femme* was an off-beat nightclub where female impersonators did their thing, and did it better, more convincingly than others at any place of its kind in town. Billed as Sheila Rose, Bobby De Marco was the star of the show. When people said that Bobby was "beautiful," they did not speak of his character, which was both dubious and mysterious. The accolade referred strictly to the classic symmetry of his features and the grace of his figure—as a man—and more especially in his nightly role as a woman.

It was the boast of his fellow performers, his friends and even his enemies, that no one outside the fold could detect the man behind the woman when Bobby was dressed for the part.

The basic revue at the *Cherchez La Femme* was simple, roughly an imitation of the genuine follies in which true women displayed their talents. As the lead, Bobby De Marco was out front and center of the chorus. He sang solos, acted in skits and told suggestive jokes. Near the close of the revue, he did a masterful semi-strip, which was funny and yet strangely provocative.

The last bows of the last performance were taken at one-thirty in

the morning, the final round of drinks served just before two. As a rule, Bobby lingered over a cocktail until closing, but on this night he was desperate to be gone; to take shelter in the sanctuary of his lavish, over-decorated and emasculated apartment. In the distortion of his fear, he had imagined that beyond the floodlights there was a squinting row of detectives, and perhaps their probing eyes had uncovered those other impersonations, the secret violations of Sheila Newberry in three forbidden acts of horror.

So Bobby made a dash for his dressing room at the instant the curtain fell. He had already decided not to change into slacks and sport jacket because the papers were now screaming of the city-wide hunt for a dangerous man-animal, considered to be powerfully constructed.

He snatched a fur-trimmed coat from his wardrobe and pulled it over the satin gown, stuffed his wallet into an evening bag, and hurried toward a rear exit. He had almost made it unseen when one of the "girls" of the chorus stepped from the men's room, right into his path.

"Bobby!" shrieked the dancer. "Where are you going in that frantic getup? Listen, lover, you very well know the law about walking the streets in drag. If the heat puts the arm on you, don't call me,

Bobby, baby. Just remember that."

"Ahh shut up and go play with your dolls," Bobby growled in the rich baritone of his own voice, then shoved past, out the door.

He was on the parking lot but there was no little red Triumph to whisk him home. He had driven it to the body shop of a neighboring city, where it was being repainted a conservative dark blue. He would take it to his home town three hundred miles east, trade it in on some massive opposite, visit briefly with his mother, and return.

He wished it were possible to confess to his mother, for she of all people might understand his tortured confusion. Playacting the part of a girl from his youth, he became a woman at heart, yet despised women at those times when they lured him with the evil attraction his mother denounced.

Because those evil women tempted him, they had to be punished! As his mother often said, "When the woman's evil tree of seduction ripens, it must be cut down and destroyed!" And his mother was *always* right.

Bobby crossed the parking lot, dodged through an alley and thence to a street a block removed. In another block he came to a cabstand, but it was deserted, so he swished on to the bus stop and waited in a frenzy of impatience, peering back

toward the club to see if he had been followed by some sharp-eyed cop from the audience.

The Cherchez was a rendezvous for some borderline characters, and the fuzz dropped around all too often.

In the guise of Sheila, Bobby thought as Sheila, and as Sheila waited for the bus, a battered old sedan pulled to the curb.

"Going my way, sweetheart?" The man had ancient eyes in a young face.

"No, I think not," said Sheila. "What is your way, love?"

"My way is your way, baby."

"Sorry," said Sheila, who was mildly amused, despite the anxiety of the moment. "My mother told me never to ride with strangers—and you look very strange to me."

The man took off with a howl of rubber.

Sheila noticed a couple of men in plain dark suits approaching on foot from the direction of the club and recognized one of them at once. The Cherchez's owner had pointed him out as a vice-squad cop. At intervals he would suddenly appear at the club bar, where he sat for hours, nursing a beer. The other, obviously the vice detective's partner, was a new face.

Sheila wondered if, on special assignments, they ever paired Vice with Homicide, and when the cops

paused to light cigarettes while exchanging muted remarks with blank faces, Sheila was at the brink of hysteria.

Just then the bus rumbled up and halted with a plaintive sigh of brakes. After a jolting heartbeat of indecision, Sheila climbed aboard. At the last instant the cops also entered, mounting with the graceful agility of physically disciplined pros. Then, as if from established procedure, they moved to the extreme rear of the bus. Here they sat hard-eyed and silent, apparently intent upon nothing, yet in position to see everything.

Sheila sank into a seat nearest the forward exit. She made ladylike adjustments, gathering the fur of the coat in front to screen the excessive cleavage, smoothing satin skirt over black hose.

As the bus rattled onward, Sheila gave the cops a slanting eye, noting that they were now faking a casual conversation, complete with smiles and chuckles. It was puzzling. Why did they choose to ride the bus and signal their presence to the all-knowing Sheila? Why did they not rather coast behind in one of their drab little sedans, those unmarked squad cars? Then they could pounce on Sheila at will, when she alighted.

What did Bobby think? asked Sheila. Well, Bobby thought maybe

it was because he was in drag, and they wanted to observe his conduct on the bus before making the arrest.

To be busted for the drag bit would not be much, nothing serious. Likely just a fine and some heavy words of warning. Still, the last thing Sheila wanted was that sort of close attention from the heat. They might uncover all of the Sheila Newberry secrets—if they hadn't done so already.

Sheila would have to escape, that's all. If not permanently, long enough to measure the degree of danger. There might never be another chance.

So when the bus ground to a halt at a stop in Glenview two blocks from home, Sheila bolted down the steps just as the driver was reaching to close the door.

They had been skirting Glenview Park, and now Sheila dashed into it and turned to watch the bus.

It was astonishing! Either the cops had been caught napping, or they were riding the bus for another purpose beyond guessing. In either case, they did not get off, and the taillights were receding in the

distance, easing his apprehension.

Sheila waited another minute, pondering the situation while fingering the wig to learn if it were properly positioned.

Suddenly a shadow loomed at the corner of her vision, and when she turned about sharply, there was the glimpse of a young face with ancient eyes before an arm whipped about her neck.

"Told you we were going the same way, sweetheart. You coulda saved your little bus fare, baby."

Sheila vanished and Bobby De Marco fought wildly, punching and kicking with the man-muscle of rage and fear. Even in the confinement of that wrenching arm, Bobby was taking him, beating him off—until the attacker reached into a pocket and brought up a lead pipe, hoisting it above Bobby's head while locking the arm tighter about his neck.

In that final second, the strangled cry of a man came from the mouth of a woman—Bobby trying to deny Sheila.

Bobby's skull crushed.

Bobby De Marco was dead.



A little research may uncover some implacable material.



EILEEN PAUSED in the doorway of Jerry's workroom. He was pounding away at his typewriter. She said, "Jerry, I'm going downtown to do some shopping."

Jerry looked up from his keyboard. "Hey!" he said, his eyes traveling up and down her figure, "And wearing my favorite dress, too. You want me to go with you?"

She shook her head. "Stay here

A HOMEMADE DRESS

and finish your sordid old murder story. I won't be long."

"You sure you feel well enough to go alone?" He came to the doorway and kissed her. "You're looking pretty pale, honey."

She grimaced. "I'm not going to allow a little indigestion to govern my whole life! Of course I'm well enough to go alone! And I'll be back in time to get your lunch."

"Take your time," he said. "I'm going out myself around eleven."

"Oh? More research?"

He nodded. "I've got to find out how fast a ten-pound cake of ice will melt on a summer day."

"Depends on the temperature of the day, I should think. Where will you have lunch, then?"

"Cafeteria at the public library." He regarded her with concern. "You sure you're OK to drive?"

"Certainly," she said, although the shortness of breath was upon her again and her heart felt like a nervous frog jumping about in her chest. "Don't worry about me, darling. Bye."

She drove into town slowly and sedately, the windows of her little car wide open to the perfect weather. The sun was shining warmly from a cloud-flecked blue sky; autumn hues were beginning to paint the leaves of the maple trees along her route; the crisp smell of fall was in the air. Eileen enjoyed

the sunshine, the colors; the odors, with what seemed a new and sharpened awareness.

She parked in the lot behind the Garner Building, locked the car, entered the lobby, and took the elevator to the seventh floor. There she hesitated briefly before a door with the name *Arthur Cummings* lettered upon it—a name she had selected from the Yellow Pages because it looked, and even sounded, discreet. She assumed a bustling, no-nonsense air which she was far from feeling, opened the door and went in.

Arthur Cummings proved to be a small, myopic, mouselike man with a finicky manner and a startling array of false teeth which he disclosed to her at once in his welcoming smile. "Mrs. Adams?" he greeted her, standing behind his desk.

"Yes," Eileen said, glancing about her at his colorless, cheaply-furnished office.

Cummings invited her to sit, and none too soon. Her heart palpitations were very bad again. She tried to remember what she had eaten for dinner last night or for breakfast this morning that could have caused her such digestive distress now. The pocket of flatulence under her heart was worse lately, in spite of all the antacids she had taken at Jerry's suggestion. She felt weak and breathless.

Noting her tenseness, Arthur Cummings tried to put her at ease. "Please don't distress yourself, Mrs. Adams. I can assure you that many times I find that a wife's suspicions of her husband, and vice versa, are utterly groundless. In which case no one—and I mean absolutely *no one* except you and I—will ever know you came to me. So relax, please, and tell me about your husband."

Eileen swallowed. "He's a mystery-story writer," she said with a wispy smile. "Not too successful, really, though he does sell a story occasionally. He works very hard, but the magazine editors seem so difficult to please, somehow . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Yes," Cummings encouraged her, "and what makes you suspect that he is . . . ah . . . philandering, Mrs. Adams?"

"A lot of little things, mostly. His changed attitude toward me recently, for one thing, just because I have a minor health problem. Like insisting that he move into our guest room until I feel more like myself again. And like his new interest in the clothes I wear. He never used to notice what dress I had on, half the time, but now he does. Also, he seems to be merely polite and thoughtful of me these days, instead of tender and loving as he was when we were first married three years ago."

Eileen flushed in embarrassment as she confided these private matters to a stranger who might, in truth, be the soul of discretion but who was, nevertheless, a private detective. Still, she hurried on.

"And there's something funny about my husband's recent devotion to research, too. He didn't bother much about researching a story when I first knew him. He just sat down and wrote it. Now he says he has to go and find out something at the public library almost every day in order to make his stories ring true. Yet I haven't seen very much material in his recent work that would require extensive research to dig up, if you see what I mean. Because of his sudden interest in research, he leaves me *alone* so much lately, even at night, whenever the library is open late."

"I see. You suspect, then, that another woman may have attracted him, and his so-called research is merely a pretext to see her, is that it?"

"Yes," Eileen said in a subdued voice. "That's it."

"Did you bring a photograph of your husband with you, Mrs. Adams?"

She gave him a wallet-size snapshot of Jerry, obscurely ashamed to be prying, like any common busybody, into the personal concerns of her own husband. Jerry, the strug-

gling young pulp writer (his phrase) who had fallen in love with her, swept her off her feet and married her less than fourteen months after her first husband's untimely death; who had made another man's widow a joyous bride again, reintroducing her to life and happiness when she had thought her life was over. A woman older than himself, at that; a woman who liked to sew and cook and play the piano and spend quiet evenings at home with him—a real domestic type. A woman, furthermore, without even an exceptionally pretty face or sexy figure to recommend her . . .

Arthur Cummings was saying, "Where is your husband now, Mrs. Adams? Do you know? If so, I'll get on this at once."

"He's leaving our house," Eileen glanced at her watch, "in about half an hour to go to the library again for more research—he says. And he's having lunch at the library cafeteria—he says."

"Right," said Mr. Cummings, rising from his chair. "I'll get out to your house right away and catch him as he leaves." He put Jerry's picture in his pocket.

"Please. And telephone me right away if you learn anything?"

"Certainly." Then, touched by unaccustomed sympathy, Cummings added, "But I sincerely hope I won't learn anything about your

husband that will distress you."

"Thank you," she said. They left his office together.

Eileen was too weak to do any shopping, even had she wanted to, so she merely went to the parking lot and sat in her car until she was fairly certain Jerry would have left for the library, presumably with Mr. Cummings following him. She couldn't bear to see Jerry again until she was sure about him, one way or the other, especially after going to the vulgar extreme of hiring a private detective to spy on him.

About noon, she drove slowly home. Jerry was gone. She went into his office and turned the switch to *Off* on his electric typewriter, which was chuckling away to itself in the empty house. Jerry always forgot to turn it off unless she reminded him. Then, too exhausted to feel hungry, she climbed the stairs to the second-floor bedroom that had been theirs once, but was now hers alone, kicked off her loafers, and stretched out thankfully on her bed without bothering to remove her dress.

The terrifying palpitations and shortness of breath subsided somewhat as she lay there quietly, thinking about Jerry and Arthur Cummings and wondering what she would do if the detective discovered that Jerry was—what was his word?—philandering. She didn't

know what she would do. She only hoped Mr. Cummings would settle the question for her quickly, that his undignified snooping wouldn't have to be prolonged for days or weeks. She didn't think she could stand that.

She pulled a light coverlet over her and had fallen into a doze when Arthur Cummings telephoned her, less than four hours after she had hired him. "Cummings," he said in his finicky voice when she picked up her bedside telephone.

"Yes?" Eileen felt her heart lurch uncontrollably.

"Can I talk? Your husband isn't home yet, is he?"

"Not yet."

"Good. I didn't think he would be. I left him in the public library half an hour ago."

Eileen's spirits rose. "Actually in the library? Doing research?"

"I suppose that's what he was doing," Cummings said, "but he didn't go there until after lunch. Also, he didn't have lunch at the library cafeteria. And—I'm sorry, Mrs. Adams—he didn't have lunch alone."

Eileen grasped the telephone more tightly but said nothing. Her initial surge of hope drained drearily away.

"Your husband picked up a young woman in his car in front of the library at eleven-fifty-five this

morning," Cummings went on, "and took her to lunch at The Hideaway on South Street. You know it?"

"Yes." The Hideaway was a gourmet restaurant with such dim lighting that Jerry had once struck a match there to read the menu.

"I followed them in, and was lucky enough to get a table near theirs. I overheard some of their conversation." Cummings cleared his throat delicately.

"Don't tell me what they said," Eileen whispered.

"No, Mrs. Adams. Suffice it to say that it was of a . . . uh . . . romantic character. After their luncheon, your husband drove the young lady to a secluded spot on Country Club Drive and parked there for twenty minutes before taking her back to work. Whereupon I saw him safely back to the library before attempting to learn the identity of the young lady."

"Did you learn it, Mr. Cummings?"

"A Miss Rosemary Cordes. An employee in a textile plant on the North Side. International Bonding and Processing Corporation."

Forlornly Eileen asked, "Is she very pretty, Mr. Cummings?"

He cleared his throat again. "Why, yes, I suppose so, if one admires brunettes. I thought there was a possibility she was wearing a

hairpiece of some kind, however—”

“Never mind,” Eileen said. “That’s enough. Please send me a written report with your bill. And thank you, Mr. Cummings.” She hung up.

So it is true, she thought bleakly, lying back on her bed and drawing the coverlet up to her chin. She began to tremble. The palpitations in her chest, the insane jerkings, seemed to redouble in force.

She was still lying there an hour later when Jerry returned from the library. She could hear him whistling as he opened the front door with his key and came into the entrance hall downstairs.

“Hey! Eileen!” he called gaily. “Anybody home?”

She didn’t answer. His footsteps came padding up the carpeted stairs to the second floor. “Eileen? Where are you, darling?”

“In here,” she said.

Jerry appeared in the doorway. “Oh. In bed, eh? Do you feel rotten again, honey?”

“Almost rotten enough to die.”

“Come on, now, baby,” he coaxed her, smiling a little. “It isn’t all that bad, surely? How about getting up and having a couple of drinks with me before dinner? Martinis always make you feel better.”

“I’ll just stay here a while longer, if you don’t mind, Jerry. This isn’t

just the indigestion that’s upset—”

“No? Then what’s bothering you?”

“Go down and get yourself a drink, darling. I haven’t planned dinner yet, actually.”

He shrugged. “Well, OK. And don’t worry about dinner. I’ll whip up some scrambled eggs, toast and tea for you, if you don’t feel like getting up.”

“All right. But get yourself a drink first. I want to talk a little, too.”

“What about?” He gave her a curious look.

“Get your drink and come back,” she said.

He went downstairs again and she could hear him taking ice cubes out of the refrigerator. When he came up to her bedroom he had a drink in one hand and the bottle of Scotch in the other. “Saves a trip downstairs for my second one,” he said, smiling at her. He set the whisky bottle on her dressing table, sat down on the twin bed beside hers, propped pillows behind his back and said, “Now then, baby, talk.”

She turned her head and looked at Jerry’s profile as he sipped his drink and felt a warm rush of tenderness for him. Poor Jerry—stuck with an old, plain, sick bore of a wife when he was so full of gaiety and youthful spirits! She said,

"Jerry, if anything happened to me, what kind of girl would you go for next?" She accompanied the question with a smile.

"What kind of crazy talk is that?" he said, giving her a surprised look. "You weren't really serious about feeling bad enough to die, were you?"

She shook her head. "Not really. I just wondered what kind of girl would appeal to you *if* anything happened to me, that's all."

He shook the ice around in his glass before he answered. "Well, she'd be different from you, I guess," he said, laughing lightly. "For variety's sake if nothing else."

"Younger, you mean?"

"Maybe. Although you know that's not important." He took a swallow of Scotch.

"Somebody a great deal prettier than I am?"

"You're pretty enough for me, baby." He grinned at her cheerfully. "Who needs a wife with a pretty face if she has plenty of blue-chip stocks?"

"Jerry! What a thing to say! Just because my first husband left me some money is no reason for you to be embarrassed about it. After all, when I die, you'll have money left to you by your first *wife*, you know. So don't be bitter, darling."

Jerry replenished his glass from the bottle on the dressing table.

"I'm not bitter, Eileen. Matter of fact, you've been very generous, sharing the income from your money with me when I'm such a lousy provider myself."

She said gently, "What I asked you was, would you pick a prettier girl than I for your next wife?"

"And I said *you* were pretty enough for me, remember?" He lowered the level in his glass by half an inch.

"I meant glamorously, sexy-type pretty," Eileen said. "Not just a frumpy housewife like I am, who loves to sew her own clothes, cook her own meals, stay home nights, instead of wearing fabulous designer clothes to famous restaurants and nightclubs for dinner with you every night."

Jerry snorted in derision. "And where would this sexy beauty and I find famous restaurants and nightclubs to go to in *this* hole?" he demanded.

"Well, there's The Hideaway. That's a pretty 'in' place, isn't it?"

Jerry froze for an instant, then laughed a little too loudly. "So it is," he said. "So it is." His words were blurring a little from the whisky. "Well, if it makes you happy, I'll agree to settle for a beautiful glamour-puss next time around."

She found that she couldn't bait him any further, not when she in-

tended to forgive him, anyway, so she said, "Somebody like Miss Rosemary Cordes for instance, Jerry?"

On his way to the dressing table for a refill he stopped in mid-stride and turned to her. His eyes were narrowed to slits and his mouth was suddenly tight and ugly. "Would you mind repeating that?" he asked her. His voice had roughened, too.

Poor Jerry, she thought. She shouldn't have come out with it so unexpectedly. "Somebody like Miss Rosemary Cordes?" she repeated in a small voice.

"I thought that was what you said." Jerry poured three fingers of Scotch into his glass and stood in front of her dressing table while he drank it down, watching her reflection intently in the mirror. The ice in his glass had long since melted, but he didn't seem to notice. He slopped a little more whisky into the glass and came back slowly to resume his seat on the bed beside Eileen's. He leaned his head against the headboard and said, without looking at her, "The Hideaway. And Miss Rosemary Cordes. Eileen darling, have you been hiring real detectives while I've been writing about fictional ones?" His tone was rallying. She decided it even had a faint note of relief in it.

"I'm afraid I have," she said. "Can you blame me, Jerry?"

"No. No, I suppose not."

"And I'm not really blaming *you*, either, darling. I know I'm not attractive enough for you. And I can understand quite well your resorting to somebody like Rosemary Cordes once in a while, for I still love you, Jerry, in spite of Rosemary Cordes."

"Enough to forgive me?" Jerry asked, swirling his whisky in the glass.

"Yes. Oh, yes, darling! Enough to forgive you, of course! If you'll just forget about Rosemary—"

He shook his head. "Can't do that," he said. "Not now."

"Why not?"

"I'm kind of deeply committed to her, Eileen. She's a great girl. I'm going to marry her."

Eileen looked at him incredulously. "*Marry* her?"

He nodded vigorously and sipped his drink.

"You *can't* marry her!" Eileen found she had enough strength to raise her voice in indignation. "I won't allow you to marry her. I won't give you a divorce."

He turned his head and gave her a sardonic smile. "It won't be necessary to give me a divorce, honey." He was having trouble pronouncing his sibilants. "Won't be necessary at all."

"You can't marry her if I refuse to divorce you."

Watching her over the rim of his

glass, which was almost empty again, Jerry said, "I can if you're dead."

She tried to laugh. "People don't die of simple indigestion, silly."

He regarded her for a long moment in silence. At length he rose unsteadily from his perch on the bed, put his drink down and said, "That's right. They don't get heart palpitations, breathing trouble, extreme weakness and pallor from it either, Eileen. Not like yours. If you hadn't always been healthy as a horse, you'd have known that."

"But you've said all along it was nothing but indigestion, Jerry . . ."

"Sure. I didn't want you to go to a doctor, that's why."

"Jerry!" She succumbed to sudden panic. "Have I got some horrible disease? Tell me the truth!"

Maliciously, he paused to refill his glass before answering her. Then he said, "Yes, I very much fear you *have* a horrible disease, my love. Not only horrible, but fatal, in fact."

"Then why didn't you want me to go to a doctor? You can't actually *hate* me, surely, even if . . ."

She ran out of breath.

Jerry made an abrupt gesture. He was quite drunk now. "A doctor might have saved your life."

She shivered. "What have I got?"

"Anemia, my dear. Aplastic anemia. A jolly little disease of the

bone marrow. Pity there's no cure when it's this far along."

Eileen felt the breath of despair touch her. "You *wanted* me to die, is that it, Jerry?"

"Of course."

"So you could marry Rosemary Cordes?"

His drunkenness made him truthful. "Partly that. But mainly so I could get my hands on those lovely blue-chip stocks good old Tom left you. I'm afraid I'll never make it big as a writer, honey."

Eileen closed her eyes. "I'm surprised you didn't just poison me. I suppose you would have, if I hadn't developed this . . . this . . . whatever it is."

"Oh, no," Jerry said, "I wouldn't have poisoned you. Nothing so crude from your clever husband, the pulp writer. Poison is too dangerous, too easy to detect. Giving you aplastic anemia was much more subtle." He laughed again. "I'll bet I could sell *this* story if I ever wrote it!"

She said, "You *gave* me anemia? That's not possible."

"Oh, yes, it is, my sweet. Leave it to old Jerry to know all the best murder methods." He shook his glass, found it empty, and tossed it at the wastebasket as though making a basketball shot. "Rosemary and I, between us, arranged your anemia."

Eileen whispered, "How? Do you mind telling me how, now that it's too late to cure me?" Realizing the enormity of Jerry's perfidy, Eileen found a new source of strength in her anger and contempt.

Jerry, surprisingly, took a corner of her coverlet in his hand and jerked it off her bed with a grandiose sweep. "There's the murderer," he said tipsily, pointing. "Right there. That good old home-made dress you're wearing, sweetheart!"

She raised her head an inch off her pillow and looked in bewilderment at the dark blue plaid dress she had on. She had made it herself some months ago. "It's the dress you like best, Jerry. You bought the material for it yourself!"

"You *thought* I bought it, but I didn't. Rosemary got it for me from her plant—she works in a textile mill. Didn't your detective tell you?"

"Yes."

"Well, let *me* tell you about that material, Eileen. It's pretty special stuff. In the trade, I understand, they call it 'leader material.' It's designed to lead commercial fabrics over and over again through chemical solutions during processing. It's never intended to leave the plant, much less be made into a dress, for it's absolutely supersaturated with chemicals, honey. Dangerous chemicals. And it's apt to prove ex-

tremely toxic to anyone in close contact with it for any length of time. Sometimes results in a really severe reaction, baby—like aplastic anemia, for example. Now do you believe me?"

Eileen nodded, eyes closed. She believed him. She could believe anything monstrous now. She wrestled with her horror doggedly and silently, determined to remain calm while she tried to comprehend and, please God, escape, the death Jerry planned for her. He would never have dared to boast of it like this, would he, unless she was too far gone to act? Or was it simple drunkenness that had led him into this colossal indiscretion?

After a moment, she opened her eyes and looked at Jerry, still standing at the foot of her bed, but now holding onto the dresser behind him to maintain a precarious equilibrium. She summoned strength from some unsuspected reserve to say, "Jerry, it's all for nothing, you know. You've committed murder for absolutely nothing, do you realize that?" She sneered. "This plot has broken down in the end, like all your others."

He wagged his head. "Don't kid old Jerry, baby. Don't snow the master plotter. How has this plot broken down?"

"I've changed my will," Eileen lied, watching him. "You won't get

my lovely blue-chip stocks, after all."

Jerry was visibly shaken. He swallowed dryly and alarm made his voice shrill. "You're lying!"

"This morning," she whispered. "I changed my will this morning."

"You went shopping this morning!" he barked. Then, uncertainly, "Didn't you?"

"You don't seriously believe that *shopping* could have got me out of bed this morning, do you, the way I felt? Oh, no. When my detective called me yesterday to tell me about Rosemary Cordes and you, I decided to change my will this morning—if I could make it into town. And I made it."

Jerry came around the bed and seized Eileen's wrist in a cruel grip. "You're lying!" he shouted hoarsely. "You're lying!"

She said, "There's a copy of my new will in my handbag, Jerry. See for yourself."

He stared at her, confused and furious. Rage gave him the look of a drunken gargoye. "Where's your handbag?"

"Downstairs, on the hall table."

He whirled and went at a staggering run to the stairs and stumbled down them.

Eileen slid off her bed and, with excruciating effort, made her way to the bedroom door and turned the key in it, locking Jerry out. Then she returned to the bed, sat down, and lifted her bedside phone into her lap. It seemed very heavy.

She dialed the police emergency number. When a man answered, she said in a high, breathless voice, "Police? I want to report a murder."

The policeman was very calm. He took her name and address and said somebody would be there in a few minutes. "And meantime," he said, "I must ask you not to leave the premises yourself, Mrs. Adams."

She suddenly felt hot tears in her eyes. "Don't worry, Officer," she gasped, trying to make herself heard above the loud arrhythmic beating of her heart. "I'll be here."

Before she collapsed on the bed again, she painfully struggled out of her dark blue, homemade dress.



The hiding may be more important than the seeking, if one is to win the game for keeps.

Hide-and-Seek

THE GAME of hide-and-seek wove its way into the sun-speckled pattern of the early afternoon until, years later, Harry found it difficult to separate the game from reality. Had the cry he remembered simply been the shrieking of a gull as it swooped over the inlet, or the scream of the young woman in the blue dress as Leonard pushed her back into the shadows under the willow tree? Had Leonard really wanted him to win the game of hide-and-seek, or had he told Harry to run back to the stone wall because there was something else he had to do under the long, tangled, leafy arms of the trees?

Harry, however, had refused to run away. His grandmother had taught him a good many things,



by
Mary Linn Roby

among them that games must be played according to the rules. It made no difference that Leonard was older. It did not even make any difference that Leonard was Harry's father. "When you play a

game," Harry's grandmother had said a hundred times, "age doesn't count."

"Hurry up and run!" Leonard repeated, his thick face flushed and dark against the background of dim willow-green. "Hurry up or I may tag the goal first."

"You've got to race me," Harry insisted stubbornly. "Now that I've found you, you've got to race me back." In a good many ways, Harry had long since decided, it was a fortunate thing that Leonard would not let himself be called Dad. It gave Harry more leeway in expressing his own personality.

"I'll give you a head start, Harry," Leonard insisted. "Go on, I tell you! Run!"

The young woman in the blue dress could not be seen now in the green shadows, and she was strangely silent. It was the first time since she had arrived that morning that she had been quiet. Even when Leonard had suggested that they play hide-and-seek with Harry and had led her off with him toward the grove of trees which separated the estate from the sea, leaving Harry with his hands pressed over his eyes, even then she had been talking.

"One . . . Two . . . Three . . . Four," Harry had said and paused, hearing her insistent voice grow fainter, certain from the sound that

they intended to hide in the willow grove.

"You can't get out of this scot-free," he heard her say. "Not after you promised me . . ."

Even when he reached twenty-five, lingering over each number, going slowly as Leonard had told him to do, he could still hear an occasional word flung back at him by the sea breeze. ". . . prosecute," he heard her say in that shrill voice. ". . . bring suit . . ." By the time he had reached forty he could no longer hear her.

Harry had been tempted to cheat then, to turn and see if he could see them. Harry liked to win, but he liked to play the game even more. It was the first time that Leonard had ever agreed to play anything with him during his rare visits to the big house which Harry shared with his grandmother.

So he had counted to one hundred as Leonard had told him to do and when, at last, he had pulled his hands down from his face and turned around, after he had waited for the contracting and expanding spots to go away from in front of his eyes, he could not see them at all. To his right the Victorian house smirked down on him, making a show of its turrets and towers and sharply pitched roofs. To his left the thickly turfed lawn stretched away to the curving blue arm of the

sea. Where could they have gone?

He was sure his father and the young woman would not have returned to the house. He had heard her say that she hated it. "When we're married," she had said that morning just after she had arrived in the village taxi, "we certainly won't live in this ghastly place." Leonard had laughed. It had been warm in the coat closet where Harry was hiding, warm and stuffy with the smell of old wood, but still he had shivered when he heard his father's laugh.

With the last number counted and the exciting part of the game about to begin, Harry scratched his bare legs nervously, recalling, as he did so, some of the bitter dregs of his resentment of an old woman who insisted on dressing him in the short-pants style of another era. It had been his hope that Leonard would insist that he be clothed as other boys, but he had not done so, nor had he kept her from insisting that Harry be privately tutored, or that he go to church twice on Sundays, or drink a tablespoon of blackstrap molasses every morning from September first through May thirtieth.

Now, letting his eyes rest speculatively on the distant grove of willows, Harry let himself dream fleetingly of the day when Leonard would decide never again to return

to the city, the day on which he would settle down here without a single one of the young women who seemed to follow him as though he were the Pied Piper, the day on which he would allow himself to be called "Dad" and play games with Harry all day. Since this was the first time his father had ever played a game with him, Harry was determined to play well. It would be no fun for Leonard to play with an inept child. If this experience were to be repeated, Harry knew that he must show Leonard how reliable he was.

Therefore, panting with the heat, he had run through the long grass toward the willows. Inside the grove it was cool and pale green. It was as though he were swimming underwater. At least it was what he imagined swimming underwater would be like. His grandmother never allowed him to do more than wade in the surf up to his knees.

One of the things that Harry always wished for when Leonard came to visit was that he would teach him how to swim, but Leonard never seemed to stay long enough for it to happen, although he had promised many times. There was always the abrupt arrival at night in the long sports car and the next day there were so many phone calls from New York that he might as well have stayed in the city for

all the attention he was able to pay to Harry. Usually there was some reason why he had to leave before dinner. This time, only the unexpected arrival of the woman in the blue dress had kept him here. Harry was almost glad that she had come. If it had not been for her, for example, Leonard might never have suggested the game. If she stayed long enough, Harry reasoned, Leonard might teach him to swim as well.

It was while he was standing just inside the grove, letting his eyes adjust to the pale green light, that he had heard the scream. It was like a gull's scream, but with a peculiar difference which Harry could not identify. Then he had noticed the branches of the willow just ahead of him waver, and he had seen the shadow that was Leonard pushing another shadow that was the woman back toward the tree trunk—and then there had been only Leonard, peering at him through the long, dangling branches.

"Hurry up and run back to the goal," Leonard said. "Hurry up or I'll win the game."

Because Harry had insisted that they follow the rules, Leonard had raced him back across the field, huffing and puffing behind him, his red face set in a scowl as though he were not really enjoying himself at

all. Harry rather expected the woman in the blue dress to come running, too, but when he reached the stone wall and touched it and turned there was only Leonard in sight.

"I win!" Harry cried. "Now it's your turn. You're IT!"

At that same moment they both heard the sound of the gong echoing through the thick, warm, summer air. "It's time for lunch," Harry said, disappointed. "Can we play again after? Can we?"

Leonard did not answer. Still scowling, he led the way up to the house, walking fast as though he were stepping on hot coals instead of thick, neatly trimmed grass. Harry's grandmother liked everyone to be on time for meals, and Harry knew that Leonard did not dare to be late either, even though Leonard *was* her son and fully grown, as well.

Later, when Harry was coming down the stairs after washing his hands, he heard his grandmother ask about the woman in the blue dress.

"She went back to the city," Leonard was saying as Harry paused on the landing. The light filtering through the stained-glass panels beside the front door turned his father's face a peculiar shade of yellow. "She decided that she wanted to get back this afternoon."

She walked to the station—took the shortcut through the willow grove. No, she didn't want me to go with her. I told her how important it is to you to have meals on time. She . . . she didn't want to upset the routine."

Leonard was lying, Harry realized with a shock of delight. The woman in the blue dress was still waiting in the willow grove. The fact that Leonard was lying about it meant that he and Harry had a secret. It meant that the game was not over.

As soon as he had finished eating, Harry excused himself and slipped off the high-backed chair at the end of the long table. Usually, when he was alone with his grandmother, she insisted that he remain with her until she had finished the last of her endless cups of coffee; but when Leonard was there her attention no longer centered on Harry, and she scarcely nodded her permission for him to leave the room.

"I hope that you don't mind my saying that I don't approve of that sort of young woman," she was saying as Harry approached the door. "The wrong class entirely. One thing you could say for Sarah, even though she did run off and leave the child to us, she came from good stock."

She must have noticed that Harry had paused by the door be-

cause her voice suddenly sank to a whisper. She did not have to worry about his overhearing too much, Harry reflected scornfully, closing the door carefully behind him. He had known for a long time that his mother had abandoned him. She had not wanted him any more than Leonard did now, but Leonard would feel differently as soon as he understood how well Harry could play the game.

He found the woman in the blue dress where he expected to find her. Propped against the trunk of the willow tree in a sitting position, she stared into the pale green light with blank, unflickering eyes. Red marks stained her long white neck. She was a good deal heavier than she looked, but Harry was strong for his age, and by the time he saw Leonard making his way across the field the body was tucked safely away in a hiding place that only he knew of, in a crevice between two great boulders which bordered the sea.

Later, much later, when Leonard came back to the house, Harry was sitting on a lawn chair beside his grandmother, who was engaged in reading him still another volume of the endless adventures of the Bobbsey Twins. Leonard's face was dripping with perspiration and his eyes were glazed, but Harry pretended not to notice. It was, he knew, all part of the game.

"Well, Leonard," Harry's grandmother said, placing a bookmark between the pages of the book and closing it with her careful deliberateness, "I suppose you've come to tell us that you've decided to go back to the city tonight."

Leonard seemed to find it difficult to speak. He opened and closed his mouth several times as though he were a great red fish gulping for air.

"I suppose," Harry's grandmother went on, "we won't see you for another month."

"No!" Leonard said suddenly in a loud voice. "I mean, no. I'm not going back to New York tonight."

Harry grinned with delight. It was good to see that Leonard intended to follow the rules.

"Then we can play another game of hide-and-seek," Harry said eagerly. "And tomorrow you can teach me how to swim."

"There won't be time for that sort of thing," Leonard said harshly. "There are . . . there are things I have to see to."

His eyes flickered over Harry and then focused as Harry quite deliberately looked in the direction of the

willow grove and smiled. An expression of incredulous comprehension settled like a dark blot on his father's face.

"You . . ." he muttered. "You . . ."

Harry nodded. He would have to think about the crevice in the rocks, consider carefully whether it was the very best hiding place he could find. Perhaps tomorrow the woman in the blue dress should be relocated even farther from the house. He knew of so many places that it would be difficult to decide. It was important that she be well hidden because if Leonard ever found her he might go back to the city, and Harry was determined that his father would never go away again.

"There's something I've been wanting to talk to you about," Harry said in a low voice, rising and taking Leonard's hand. He was surprised to find the skin so cold. "I think you ought to tell Grandmother that I'm too old to wear short pants. You'll make her understand, won't you?" he said, looking trustfully into his father's panic-stricken eyes. "You'll make her understand, won't you, Dad?"



... And the innocent, too, may be blessed; with the aid of a friend, of course.

Blessed

are the Meek



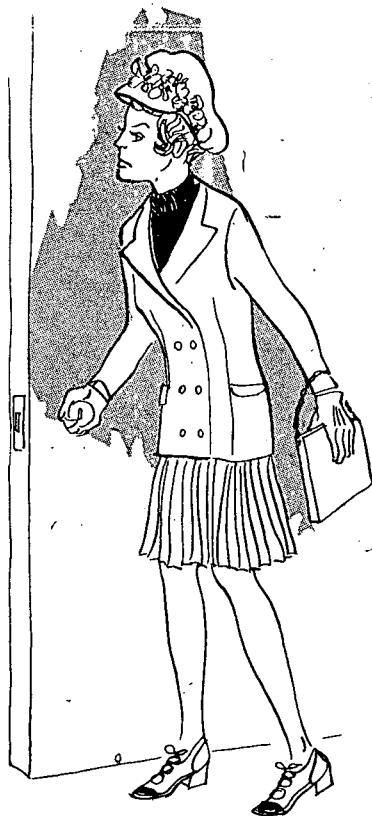
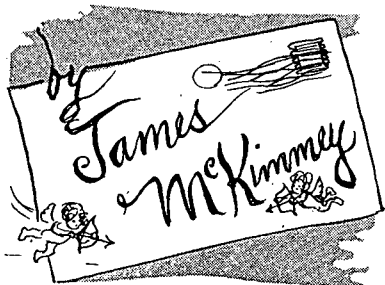
THE MORNING MAIL had just been delivered when George Martin decided to pause in his work as an accountant to heat water in a small electric pot for a single cup of instant coffee. He sighed as he eased back into his swivel chair. A short, graying man, George reflected, by his middle, too little exercise, and by his sad expression of eyes a life that had failed to reach even remotely his early expectations.

He gazed bleakly at the stack of incoming correspondence, deciding miserably that the envelopes could contain only bills, bills, bills. September now, and he probably wouldn't be able to put it in the black until the following March and April, when he would have to work fifteen, sixteen, sometimes eighteen hours a day preparing tax returns for his clients. Every year at that time he'd considered the idea of

hiring a young accountant to help him; but then, of course, Louise, his wife, had been right about that, too. Where were they going to wind up during the balance of the year if he dissipated a part of the tax-time gravy on hired help?

"Where, indeed?" he said aloud, and reached out to go through the envelopes, one by one. "Oh, electricity," he said. "Oh, gas." He shook his head wearily. Those were for his duplex. There was also one for his office. "Oh, yes," he said. "Dear, dear office rent."

Then he came to quite another kind of envelope which was not a business type at all. It was pink, with a single airmail sticker and tiny blue cupids running about the edges, one after the other. It had been addressed to him in a swirling, flowing, blue-ink script he failed to recognize. The letter had been mailed in France, and a return address, he saw with surprise, indicated that someone named Rhonda Neele had sent it from a Paris hotel.



"Paris?" he asked, shaking his head. He had, of course, never been to Paris; or anywhere else, really. He'd simply remained in San Francisco and married Louise, and visited his mother regularly in the small cottage where he'd grown up—until she died a year ago. He'd dreamed, of course, of going anywhere and everywhere, and he'd

read travel magazines and books in the evenings when his eyes were not too tired. Paris had certainly been one of the targets of his imagination; he would stride handsomely down the Rue de la Paix, alone—Louise was simply nonexistent in those mental wanderings—looking at the girls as they stared back at him with admiration and hope in their eyes.

He slit the envelope open and removed the letter, then read it swiftly, with disbelief:

My darling George!

What a wonderful interlude! I think of it every moment, even when I'm over here working. Oh, George, when I saw you for the first time in that cocktail lounge, I *knew*. And I'm dying to return to your arms! Even if I am merciless, and *hate* the idea of your being with your wife while I'm over here, I know you'll do just what you promised when the proper moment arrives—leave her, with kindness, with gentleness, because that's the sort of wonderful man you are!

Then, oh, sweet, oh, true love! You and I, together, forever.

With deepest love,
Rhonda

George sat with his eyes wide open. *Who in the devil*, he thought, *is Rhonda?*

Then the door was being opened, and he was barely able to get the

letter and envelope into the top drawer of his desk before Louise, short and athletically built, quick-moving with a perpetual look of fire in her eyes, wearing a new suit and a flowered hat, came hurrying in.

"Ah," George managed, "Louise."

She stared at him with so much accusation that for an anxious moment he was certain that somehow she'd found out about the letter. Then he realized that was foolish, of course. She was simply accusing him of something else as she jerked the cord of the pot from its socket, saying, "You've been dreaming again, George! You've let the water boil up and the pot's dry! Do you think these things grow on trees?"

"Well," he said weakly. "I was just—"

"Going through the mail," she said sarcastically, then picked up the stack and examined each envelope darkly. "Cusple and Son here. Overdue on what they owe, aren't they, George?"

"A little, I guess."

"Well, a little is too much!"

"But I've handled them for years now, and—"

"Did you know you forgot your sandwich again this morning?" she asked, slapping down a plastic-wrapped sandwich on his desk.

"Well . . . By golly, I guess I

did." He smiled sadly, regretting the fact that now he would not have reason to leave the office for a hamburger in the diner down the block, where a very lovely young blonde named Ethyl would serve him. Now he would have to eat Louise's sandwich at his desk.

"If I take the trouble to get up and make you lunch, George, I think you should have the decency to remember to take it with you. Now I've got to go. And either Cusple and Son pay up or it's over for them—snap, just like that!"

He nodded with resignation. "Where are you going, by the way, Louise?"

"To Original Joe's for lunch with Myrtle, Grace and Penny, before we bowl! Now you watch your water from now on, George. And don't dawdle over that sandwich forever, do you hear me? And don't be late for dinner either!"

At five-thirty, George answered the telephone to hear the voice of his long-time friend, Harvey Poole, saying, "Quickie little nip, George?"

"Well, I don't know, Harvey. Louise is on something of a tear today, and I wouldn't want to be late for dinner."

"George. Who owns the pants, eh?" Then Harvey laughed as he always did when extending that question.

"It's just that I have *my* life, Harvey," George said, hurt audible in his voice. "And you have yours."

"Yeah, do I! But come on, George—one swiftie. What do you say?"

"Well . . ."

Then he finally agreed, feeling guilty, and knowing, too, that he was risking adding strength to Louise's perpetual temper should he be found out. Louise did not approve of even the beer he would order, although he knew that she, herself, often imbibed in something stronger after bridge, golf, or bowling with her girlfriends . . .

After another puzzled examination of the pink letter, he carefully fitted it into the back of a metal file, then put on his hat and placed what was left of the sandwich Louise had forced on him into a pocket. It was turkey, and he hated turkey. It was also dry and he liked plenty of mayonnaise, so he'd eaten only a couple of bites. He threw the rest into a trash can as he left his building and strode five blocks through the September warmth of the city to a small, dark-wooded cocktail lounge. Harvey Poole, slim, handsome and expensively suited, was waiting at a table with a straight-up martini before him.

"How's it go, George?" Harvey said happily, slipping his arm

around the waist of the pretty waitress waiting to take George's order. "How's it go, anyway?"

"Good, Harvey. Real good. And I'll have a bottle of beer." He nodded as the waitress left and speculated vaguely over the reason he and Harvey had remained friends for so long. They'd gone to the same elementary school together, of course, then to the same high school. Although Harvey had done well in sports and had, in fact, become a star athlete where George had not even participated, they'd still become friends. After that, Harvey had joined the Navy, and George had worked as an obscure clerk, getting his accounting education nights.

Harvey had returned a lieutenant, with even more confidence than he'd owned before, then gotten an insurance license and opened his own office, after which he'd turned into an immediate success. George, on the other hand, continued to plod along, neither gaining nor losing much ground—but certainly never going where he'd intended to go.

"How's Betty, Harvey?" he asked. "And the kids?"

"Splendid!" Harvey said with gusto. "Absolutely splendid, George!"

That was another essential difference between them, George

thought, watching the waitress coming back with his beer. He and Louise had no children, but Harvey and Betty, a beautiful, healthy-looking girl who turned heads when she walked down the street, had seven. Nevertheless, and despite that fact, Harvey was industrious and successful at steadily dating other women on the sly. If his wife had ever discovered that fact, she had, out of a strange but fierce loyalty to Harvey, chosen to ignore it.

The waitress poured beer from a beaded bottle and placed both glass and bottle on the table as Harvey slipped his arm around her waist again and pulled her ear down next to his mouth. He whispered. She whispered back, then walked away laughing. Harvey smiled with satisfaction.

"What did she say?" George asked, trying to keep an edge of envy out of his voice.

"Yes," Harvey said, smugly. "Essentially she said yes."

George shook his head and sipped at his beer. "How do you get away with it, Harvey?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Harvey said, looking amused. "Truly. I mean, why not?"

"Well . . . it's immoral."

"George! *Nothing's* immoral, in my dictionary!"

"But I mean as far as Betty's concerned?"

"Now, how is Betty concerned? Come on, George, tell me."

"Well . . . is it fair to her?"

"I provide her with a fifty-thousand-dollar home she adores. She gets a new car of her own every two years. I've fathered all of her children. She is *blissfully* happy—she told me so just this morning. How much can you give a woman, George?"

George nodded bleakly. "If you say so, Harvey. I guess it's each to his own. You do it your way; and I do it mine—with Louise."

Harvey tasted his drink, then said, "Yes, and I've always wondered about that, George. Even though we've been close friends for all of these years, I've just never known. How did you . . . ah . . . happen to tie up with her in the first place? Happened while I was in the Navy, I remember."

George held his beer glass and gazed across the room. All kinds of people came here, he observed, including several pretty girls who were now seated around the lounge in the dim light. "Well," he said, "Mother liked her, you know."

"Yes," Harvey said, nodding. "I did know that. And she did right from the beginning?"

"Yes, right from the beginning."

Now George was thinking of that strange letter again, as his mind recreated that swirling, flowing

script, which wrote, "My darling George! . . . when I saw you for the first time in that cocktail lounge . . . dying to return to your arms . . . oh, sweet, oh, true love . . . together, forever . . . Rhonda." Had a girl like one of these in the room right now looked at him, *admired* him, from a distance—then simply *imagined* that they'd met for that "wonderful interlude"? Had she taken that fantasy all the way across the Atlantic to Paris and then written the letter? Simply because she'd been bowled over by him, head over heels, just seeing him from across the room? Mind-boggling, certainly, but perhaps he'd never honestly created the true concept of himself. Perhaps what he'd been seeing in the mirror was a lie, because if that girl had written him things like that . . .

"So your mother, then, George," Harvey was saying. "Maybe I can understand *her* going for Louise in that fashion. But why *you*, George?"

George's head wagged morosely. "I don't know," he said wearily. "I wish I did. But I don't."

He restricted his cocktail time with Harvey Poole to a single beer, then took a bus home because Louise had their car as she always did. He was hoping, as he stepped into their ancient brick duplex, that he wasn't going to be late for dinner.

As it turned out, however, there was no dinner, because Louise wasn't there. She arrived an hour and a half later, with a loose smile and her flowered hat askew, carrying a brown paper sack.

George, who had been sitting and pondering over that pink letter, cleared his throat, then said, "Bowl a good game?"

"Did I bowl a good game!" she said, giggling.

George nodded and looked at his wristwatch.

"You don't have to do that, George!" she said, her words sounding blurred. "I know what time it is."

Again he cleared his throat. "Dinner time perhaps?"

"That's right!" she said. "And here's yours!" She tossed the sack to him. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He listened to her climbing the steps, heard her burst into hooting laughter, then there was only silence as he drew out from the sack the frozen dinner she had gotten him. Listlessly, he heated it, ate it, then went downstairs to the cot in the basement. He often slept there. He didn't mind and neither did Louise. He especially didn't mind tonight because it kept him two stories away from her, where it was easier to think about the woman named Rhonda Neele.

Ah, *Rhonda*, he thought gazing

up at blackness. *What manner of creature are you? How did you fall in love with me—and why? And, he thought finally, What do you look like, dear Rhonda?*

A lovely, beautiful, perfectly-formed creature, he decided drowsily, a stunning goddess of a woman . . .

Four days later, when he'd decided that he would hear no more from Rhonda Neele, three more letters arrived. They had been mailed from Nice, Rome and Athens, and had come in at the same time.

His hands trembled as he read them, each proclaiming the same absolute love as the first. She explained that, as a traveling dress buyer, she was required to move from designer to designer in her quest for new styles but, she wrote, she would be returning the following week by way of New York. After that, she would take an immediate jet west, and they would be together again. Then she wrote, "Have you left her yet, George? Oh, you must have! I *know* you have. And damn this constant traveling, or I would have letters from you, wouldn't I? Well, I'd telephone, but I couldn't stand hearing your voice and not being with you. So . . . next week, darling! Then back to your loving arms!"

He placed the letters carefully in

the back of the file and failed to get any work done that day, or the next, or the next.

The following week, just a few days before the woman named Rhonda Neele would return to San Francisco, George concluded dismally that he finally had the answer to all of it. He had imagined her to be young, lovely and beautiful, but she was not, he decided with regret. She was undoubtedly wholly and absolutely unattractive, as old as he, or older—someone he'd never looked at twice, someone who'd sat in the dimness of that bar where he habitually met Harvey Poole, pathetically lonely, devoted to her work because there was nothing else, then finally resorting to something like this: the sending of these ridiculous letters.

A shame, he decided sadly, truly a shame—and what if she actually did return to San Francisco, this pathetic creature, expecting him to . . .

Then the fifth letter arrived with its intense message of love, and this time she explained that she would be arriving in the city late Wednesday night. She had, she wrote, some perfectly dreadful but essential appointments to keep on Thursday, including one terribly boring dinner that evening. So, since they had been apart this long, and since she wanted to be gloriously ready for

him, she was forcing herself to wait until Friday, at noon, for their meeting. "Call my hotel then, my darling," she wrote. "Oh, my sweetheart! Together again!"

With the letter was a photograph of herself which had been taken at the beach on the Riviera. George stared at it for a very long time, seeing an incredibly beautiful girl lying on the sand in a bikini. His throat became dry and he could hear himself breathing. Then, realizing the door was being opened and hearing Louise calling harshly, "George," he managed to slide the letter and photograph under the blotter on his desk and wipe his wet palms on his trousers before she got all the way in.

"Georgel!" Louise repeated, dropping a wrapped sandwich on his desk, then sitting down to stare at him with accusation. "What's happening to you?"

"Well . . ." he said, knowing that his voice was fogged and lacking in volume. "Nothing, really."

"Your voice sounds funny."

"A cold coming on, I suppose."

"Then take some cough drops. But I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the fact that you haven't done a wink's worth of work all week!"

"Well . . ." George said again, dabbing his perspiring forehead with his handkerchief.

"I came downtown yesterday, and you weren't even here! Because you were where?"

"Well . . ."

"Is that all you can say? Now, don't lie to me, George. I went looking and saw you through the window of that sleazy coffee shop, ogling that cheap waitress who works in there. So I came back here and went through your desk and it didn't take me ten minutes to find out you haven't done a thing all week! I would have had it out with you then, only I had a bridge game. And I would have had it out with you last night, only you were asleep in the basement when I got home. And I would have had it out with you this morning, only I've been waking up with migraines. But I'm having it out with you right now. What's happening, George?"

He rested his palms on the blotter and had the distinct impression that the letter and photograph beneath had generated enough heat so that he could feel it.

Louise took a long breath. "I'm trying, George—I'm honestly trying. I made a sandwich for your lunch and brought it to you, didn't I? But I've got a golf tourney in an hour, so I'm waiting for you to tell me." She bent forward, looking earnest now. "George, don't think of me as a girl who became your wife. Just think of me as a buddy. Can

you do that, George? For me?"

He sat looking at the blotter, then shook his head. "No, I don't think so, Louise."

She slammed the door so hard when she left that George was worried about the frosted glass shattering—but it didn't. When he heard the elevator doors open and close in the hallway outside, he removed the letter and picture from under the blotter and gazed at the picture for a long time again. Then he returned both to the envelope and got the other pink letters from the back of the file, knowing full well that if Louise had been going through his desk, the files would be next.

He walked to a wall where a large picture of his mother was hung in a heavy frame. He swung it out and fitted the letters behind, then adjusted the frame back against the wall. The weight, he decided, would hold them securely in place.

At noon he unwrapped the sandwich Louise had brought, only to discover that it was another dry turkey, so he put on his hat and walked down the street to the diner where he was served a hamburger by the pretty waitress who worked there. He knew that her name was Ethyl because he'd heard other people call her that, and although he'd never spoken to her other than to give an order, he was considering

doing so today. After all, *someone* had fallen hook, line and sinker for him, hadn't she? Why not this lovely damsel as well, he thought.

Then, just as he was preparing to mention what a nice day it was, a second bleak and dismal realization came to him: what reason did he have to believe the photograph he'd received was actually of the person who'd written him the letters?

No, he decided defeatedly, it was not her picture at all, but someone else's—a totally false image the writer had created for herself. Well, he thought miserably, the following Friday he was supposed to be telephoning her at her hotel right here in San Francisco . . .

He dropped his partly-eaten sandwich and got up to move to the cash register.

"Something wrong with the burger?" the waitress asked with concern.

"No," George said, putting down a bill and shaking his head miserably.

"Just not hungry, huh?" she said, giving him change.

"Not too."

"Well . . . you have a good day, Mr. Martin."

"Why, thank you, ah . . . Ethyl," George said, having had no idea before this moment that she knew his name, and realizing as well that she

was being honestly warm to him.

When the telephone rang in his office just before four o'clock, George lifted it to hear Harvey Poole inviting him to join him for a drink.

"Why not?" George said with abandon.

"Fivish?"

"How about right now?"

"Are you feeling well, George?"

"I'm feeling absolutely wonderful," George said grimly, then hung up and put on his hat again and walked to the bar. He ordered a bourbon and soda and drank it. The cocktail waitress was putting his second down as Harvey came in.

"Two?" Harvey asked with incredulity.

"I may get snockèred, Harvey."

Harvey ordered from the waitress, slapping her hip lightly and with affection, then rested his elbows on the table and studied George solemnly. "George," he said at last, "What's gone wrong?"

George drank, then shook his head, and when the waitress returned with Harvey's drink, he ordered another for himself.

"Haven't we always been friends, George?"

"The best." George nodded gravely.

"Then what're friends for but to confide in? Something's bothering you, George."

For a few moments he considered telling Harvey all about it, but then, he decided, Harvey would listen with disbelief, then smile, then laugh. No, he decided, signaling the waitress, he wasn't going to confide in Harvey.

He was lifting his fourth drink when he suddenly felt a strange sensation. He blinked, saying, "I may be snookered already, Harvey. I felt the floor sliding."

"I just think we had a little earthquake, George."

"Oh," George said.

"Maybe you ought to slow it down, George. You know. Before you—"

But George tipped his glass up and drained it. He said slurringly, "I'll tell you one thing, Harvey. When you live prac . . . prac . . . prac'ally on the San Andreas fault, once in a while you're going to have an earthquake, aren' you?" He nodded and winked wisely at his friend.

As he swung the door open and came stumbling into his living-room, he saw Louise sitting there in a rocker with a shawl over her lap, staring at him, her eyes dark with hatred.

"Well, well, well," he managed, stopping in the center of the room and swaying back and forth.

"Well, well, well," she whispered

furiously. "You're *really drunk!*"

"And I gather," he said, "you're not." He grinned, "For a change."

"You fool!" She reached under the shawl, drew out the collection of pink letters and threw them at him. They fluttered to the floor around him. He looked down at them, then nodded finally, and said, "Oh."

"Yes, *oh!*" she yelled. "Do you know I won that tournament today, and got the big trophy! And, like any loving wife, I wanted to share the glory with my husband, so I took it up to your office, only to find you were goofing off again! Probably with your cheating friend, Harvey Poole! Is he the one who taught you how to get something like *that* started!" She swept a hand toward the fallen letters. "She's got to be crazy to go for *you!*"

"How'd you . . ." George slurred, feeling himself swaying, ". . . fin' them?"

"The earthquake sent them spilling down from behind your mother's picture while I was standing right there! *Your own mother's picture!*"

"Where they were, all right."

He started to lean down to pick them up, wondering if he could manage it, when Louise shouted, "Keep your hands off of them! I'm telling you, this is the end of it! I'm *leaving* you, and taking everything,

and I mean *everything*! Now try to get it through your soggy brain. You be at L. C. MacDoughle's office on Market Street Friday morning at ten sharp. Do you hear me?"

George could not suppress a small hiccup, then he said, "Who's L. C. MacDoughle?"

"My lawyer!" Louise cried.

He tipped forward, backward, sideways, then forced himself to stand steady. "I din' know you had a . . . lawyer, Louise."

The office of L. C. MacDoughle was large and well-furnished, and it was absolutely silent as the bony-faced MacDoughle, with George on one side of his desk and Louise on the other, read a list of possessions Louise had prepared for him. "And so that's everything?" he said, finally, looking up. "And you want all of it, Mrs. Martin? House, furniture, car, what savings you have—?"

"I want the buttons off his vest!" Louise shouted, her face red.

"Well, now, Mrs. Martin," the lawyer said gently, "reason is better than passion, in these cases."

"How much alimony do I squeeze out of him?" Louise said loudly.

"Ah . . . child support, yes," the lawyer said. "But you have no children, of course. So, no alimony—not these days in this state, Mrs. Martin. And, in fact, although these—" he

tapped the neat pile of pink envelopes on his desk, looking at George, "—have some very serious moral implications, you still have every right, Mr. Martin, to defend your half of what you and Mrs. Martin own jointly. That is, unless you're willing and prepared to sign this." He slid a form toward George. "Giving all of your mutual possessions to Mrs. Martin at this time, instead of waiting for—"

"I'll sign," George said without hesitation.

"How about all the junk in his office?" Louise asked.

"Your husband is entitled to continue earning a living," the lawyer said carefully. "So nothing pertaining to his work has been included in what goes to you. But, remember, you're getting everything else."

MacDoughle extended a pen to George, who took it and signed swiftly, saying, "Am I free now?"

"Are you free now!" Louise exploded. "I'll tell you this: I'm selling everything you just signed away! I'm moving into an apartment by myself. Then I'll start accounting school, open my *own* office and do it *right*! Instead of depending upon a lame-brained mush-head! I'll personally put you out of business! I'll—!"

George, however, had stepped out of the office, closed the door be-

hind him and was pressing the elevator button.

In his own small office again, thinking of Rhonda Neele's instructions to phone her at her hotel on this day at noon, he decided with resignation that he might as well do it. No matter how attractive or unattractive, no matter how crazy or sane she might be, it made no difference now. What woman would continue to have interest in a man who'd just lost everything but the buttons on his vest and the few possessions in immediate view?

He looked at his watch, sighed, then finally realized the precise reality of what had happened. He was grinning as the mailman came in with the morning's delivery. George went through it and found a payment in full from Cusple and Son, which he viewed with relief, having only a few dollars left in his wallet.

He also found another kind of envelope. He slit it open and stared at an airline's insurance policy. It had been purchased by Rhonda Neele in New York. He was the beneficiary—and the value was \$100,000.

"Lord," he whispered, shaking his head in disbelief, then reached for the phone.

Moments later he was listening to a desk clerk saying, "You must have

heard one went down in Illinois. No survivors. I had a feeling, you know. I mean, she had reservations—she always stayed with us when she was in town. When she didn't check in . . . well, this morning's paper had the list of passengers. Did you know her well?"

"Actually," George said slowly, "I didn't, really."

"A beautiful girl. A stunner. But that's the way it goes sometimes."

"Yes," George said softly, "that's the way it goes sometimes."

As soon as he hung up, the telephone started ringing. He kept staring at the policy, then picked up the phone again and answered.

"George," Harvey said unhappily, "Louise just got on the phone and blatted the whole thing to Betty."

"I see," George said.

"She thinks I somehow influenced you into getting involved with the gal, so Betty hung up on her, of course. You know how loyal Betty is."

"Yes," George said, "I know, Harvey."

"But, George, it *was* my fault, don't you see?"

George blinked again. "No, I guess I don't see."

"Well, I've done it before. Several times, in fact. And I just never thought it would cause any trouble. I used your name, George—I told

Rhonda I was you instead of me. Then, toward the end, in the heat of things, so to speak, I forgot I'd done it. I'd just gotten used to her calling me George, you see. I told her to go ahead and write me at the office. My secretary is most discreet, you understand—"

"I understand," George said, nodding, a corner of his mouth twitching. "Everything now, I think."

"I just thought she'd found someone else when I didn't hear from her. That kind, you know—a loner, with no family ties, who needs something going. But when I found out that *you'd* gotten her letters—she must have taken your office address from the phone book—and that was why Louise left you and took practically everything but the buttons on your vest, well, my heavens, George, I felt like the devil about it! All my fault! If there were only something I could *do*! But I can't tell Louise, you see, because she'd spill the beans to Betty. And there goes my *own* position, you understand?"

"I understand," George said softly. "But you needn't feel bad,

Harvey. Separating from Louise was inevitable anyway. The letters didn't make that much difference."

"Do you honestly mean that, George?"

"I do, Harvey."

"And you're not going to hold a grudge?"

"Certainly not."

"Ah, George, they broke the mold when they made you. We'll still be absolute friends?"

"As long as we live, Harvey."

"Well, I promise you one thing, I'll never use your name again. That's firm. And when you hear from Rhonda again—"

"I won't," George said.

"She told you that?"

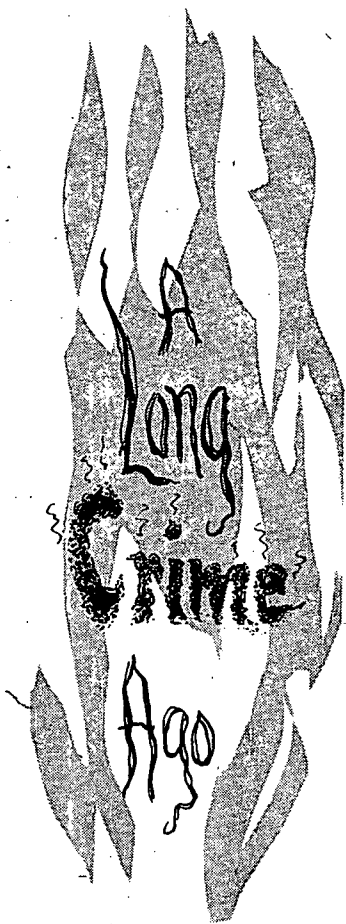
"Let's say I know it to be a fact."

"Well, she did find somebody else, eh? But, George, I'm just thinking about you now—Louise leaving you that way, and your being all alone, picked clean. I mean, what are you going to *do*?"

"Well," George said, folding the policy and placing it securely in an inside pocket, "I think I'll just go down the street and buy a hamburger."



Consummate gratification rarely has a price tag.



MAYBE IT WASN'T quite in character for a doctor to come to me to discuss murder, but circumstances being what they were, it did make sense. At least it did after Dr. Maxwell explained some of the facts to me.

To begin with, let me explain that we have been friends for many years, Doc Maxwell and I, ever since he dug that .45 slug out of my spleen and saved my life. That was back when I was a rookie cop. Later, when I resigned from the police force to open my own private agency, Doc Maxwell and I went on being friends. Turned out he had the same liking for chess and sour mash whiskey as I did.

He belonged to the yacht club, the golf club, and had a hunting lodge in the country, but he dug my bachelor pad and stereo tape deck as a place to get away from things and relax. It was a kind of strange friendship, I guess you could say—one of the city's leading physicians and a private investigator who just managed to stay a month ahead of his bills. Still, we appreciated each other.

Military history happened to be another hobby of mine, and over the years I had collected a modest library on the subject. Doc's idea of a perfect evening was to win two out of three chess games from me, get mildly blasted on good sour mash, then lean back and become involved in a ridiculous, endless argument about some obscure battle in the Napoleonic wars.

I always figured I was doing the man a humanitarian service. With his socially hungry wife, selfish kids

by Charles
Boeckman

and competitive friends, he needed an escape. Chess, sour mash whiskey and arguing with me certainly beat taking dope or running around with his office nurse.

Back to this thing about murder, though. He brought up the subject in a roundabout way one night after our second game of chess and third drink of whiskey. "You know, Scott, that whatever passes between a patient and his physician is privileged information. By that I mean, I am not obligated to divulge anything a patient tells me, even if the police question me."

"So I've heard," I nodded.

He studied the chessboard, made a very poor move with his rook and asked casually, "Does it work the same way between a private investigator and his clients?"

"In theory—at least to a point. That was a very dumb move," I said ungraciously, taking one of his knights and pinning his rook and queen.

Ruefully, he surveyed the disaster on the chessboard. "My mind isn't on the game," he admitted. "I might as well tell you the real reason I dropped by tonight. It concerns a patient of mine, John Harrison."

"The name is familiar," I said. "I seem to hear cash registers ringing in the background when the name is mentioned."

Doc Maxwell lit one of his large, black cigars and leaned back thoughtfully. "Yes, as a matter of fact Harrison is—or to be more correct, was—one of the wealthiest men in town up until a few years ago. I say 'was' because he made some bad investments. Also, his health has been steadily declining. He has spent most of the past year in hospitals and private sanitariums. He's by no means poor, but his medical expenses have been astronomical—and all to no avail, I might add. He's a dying man."

"Too bad. What's his trouble?"

Maxwell puffed on the cigar.

"Technically, high blood pressure, failing heart, and now cirrhosis of the liver. That's what is going to carry him off—what will appear in the medical reports. But if you want to know what has actually been slowly killing the man for years, I would have to tell you it is a sick conscience. The other organic troubles are its by-product."

"You mean a lousy conscience can give somebody cirrhosis of the liver? Come on, Doc."

"It can, if the man has been steadily consuming a fifth of liquor a day for years to numb the torment of his conscience."

"Well, I guess if you look at it that way," I admitted.

"Certainly. I'm not in the psychiatric field, but we medical men all have to look at the patient as a whole man. When his organs begin to fail, it has often been emotional stress and strain that broke them down—guilt, tension, frustration, what have you. In Harrison's case it has been guilt. I've been treating the man for years, warning him about his blood pressure, trying to get him to slow down, to ease up on the booze. But something has been driving the man, haunting him, never giving him a moment's peace. Now, at last, I have found out what it is—unfortunately too late, to undo the damage it's done to his body."

"This guilt—was it something he

did that he wouldn't talk about?"

"Yes," the doctor said bluntly. "Murder."

I whistled softly and had another drink on that one. "And he's gotten by with it all these years?"

"As far as the law is concerned, yes. Come on, Scott, you know not all murders are solved."

"Unfortunately, only a percentage," I agreed.

"To get to the point—if he retained you, he'd have to tell you all the details of this matter. That brings us back to the problem of privileged information. Would you be required to tell the police anything?"

"In the case of murder? I could be an accessory. Concealing information about a murder is—"

"But, Scott, couldn't you stretch a point in this case? The murder took place fifteen years ago. Now, I give you my word, Harrison has only a couple of weeks to live—a month at the most—so what could possibly be gained by having the police file charges against a dying man?"

"You have a point there," I admitted. "But what reason would a dying man have to engage a private investigator in regard to a murder that took place fifteen years ago?"

"I'll let him explain that to you if I have your word that you will keep the facts confidential."

"OK," I agreed. "Now, about this chess game . . ."

Maxwell gazed sourly at his impossible position. "I might as well concede this one."

Doc set up an appointment for me to see John Harrison at the hospital the following afternoon. When I walked into Harrison's room I could readily agree with Doc's diagnosis. He was obviously a goner. He was bundled up in a wheelchair by the window; his skin

was the color of an old lemon; his flesh hung loosely on his bones. The room smelled of death.

Dr. Maxwell introduced us, then he and the nurse discreetly left the room.

"Dr. Maxwell has told me all about you, Mr. Davis," Harrison said. "He has recommended you highly as a competent investigator." His voice, though dry and brittle, was surprisingly strong for a man in such poor physical condition.

"I'm curious to know why you need a private investigator, Mr. Harrison," I admitted. "I'll have to have that information before I agree to take the case."

"Dr. Maxwell has told me you agreed to keep this matter entirely sub rosa. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Very well." He was interrupted by a coughing spell. When it was over, he leaned back panting. After he had caught his breath, he smiled bitterly. "Not that I really have any fear of the police now, but it could be inconvenient to have them bothering me. Peace is what I am seeking now. You understand?"

"Yes, and I'll keep the matter to myself."

"Good! Now these are the facts—I'll tell you everything frankly. Fifteen years ago I murdered a man—Bill Rhodes—who was my partner



at that time. We were operating a lumberyard, not very successfully. Matter of fact, we were fast approaching bankruptcy. Bill was like a stone around my neck. Nice enough young fellow, but a sentimentalist—no real guts for business. Had his mind on his pretty wife more than the job. Well, you see, I stood to gain a lot if Bill died and the business went up in smoke—literally, I mean—in a fire. It was the only way I could see out of the dilemma, as I was about to lose everything. I was in my late thirties then, with no way to start over. One night I simply went down there, poured kerosine around and lit a match. Nothing burns quite like a lumberyard once you get it started, Mr. Davis. Bill was there late that evening, working on the books—I saw the light on in his office. He was trapped. As I ran away, I heard his screams.” A dark haze spread across Harrison’s eyes and he began trembling. “For fifteen years, Mr. Davis, I have been hearing that man’s screams.”

He paused, closing his eyes, his jaws knotting as he fought to regain his composure. Finally he was able to continue, his voice rasping now. “The next morning they found Bill’s corpse in the ashes, roasted like a pig at a barbecue. Well, I gained two ways. They never proved arson, of course—hardest thing in the

world to pin down—so I collected the insurance for the lumberyard. Also, Bill and I had taken out one of those business-partnership life insurance policies. I received a tidy sum from that.

“I left that town, invested the money in other businesses, real estate, a fiber glass boat construction company, textiles—did all right, too. But I could never live with that murder—never erase the way that man screamed. I had to keep at my business constantly, had to drink—only way I could blot out what I’d done. I got married, but no woman could live with a man under those circumstances, so she divorced me. Finally . . . Well, after the years of trying to run away from that guilt, I’ve destroyed myself.”

The room fell silent as Harrison stared wide-eyed at the wall as if looking through it to the hell in which he’d existed for the past fifteen years.

It was a gruesome story. I tried to work up some sympathy for Harrison, but failed—there was something inherently evil about the man. I couldn’t shake the feeling that whatever suffering his conscience might have dealt him was well earned and could hardly compare with being fried alive—the fate that had befallen his partner. However, I also reminded myself that the man was employing me and I was here

to do a job, not indulge myself in personal feelings about Harrison's unsavory morals. "I still don't understand how I can be of any service to you, Mr. Harrison."

With an effort, he brought himself back to the present. "Bill Rhodes left a widow, Mary Rhodes. I have no idea what became of her. I think she moved away from that town shortly after I left. At any rate, no one there seems to know what became of her. I want you to find her, Mr. Davis. Leave no stone unturned until you find that woman. I am no longer the wealthy man I was a few years ago . . . the long illness, the medical expenses . . . But I still have enough money to pay your fee and give something to Bill Rhodes' widow. Perhaps if I make things easier for her, the time I have left will be easier for me. Now do you understand, Mr. Davis?"

"Yes," I said, "I think I do."

"Whatever it costs, Mr. Davis, don't leave a stone unturned."

I didn't like him any more than before, but he had given me a job to do, and I would see what could be done.

It turned out to be easier than I thought it would be, once I made a trip back to that town where Mr. Harrison had murdered his business partner. Many old-timers in the town remembered the lumberyard

fire vividly. I even drove by the spot, partly out of curiosity. A motel occupied the premises now. I made discreet inquiries, followed up leads, and took an airplane trip across the country. I reminded myself I didn't have a whole lot of time—or rather, John Harrison didn't have a whole lot of time.

In five days I was back in town with some rather-surprising information for Harrison. I called Dr. Maxwell. He was ready to make his hospital rounds for the day and said he would meet me in John Harrison's room.

Half an hour later, I was standing before Mr. Harrison again. He looked the same, seated again in the wheelchair beside the window. His eyes were bright. Eagerly, he asked, "You found her, Mr. Davis?"

"Yes. Here is my bill. It includes some travel expenses."

Impatiently, he handed the bill to a secretary who was working on some papers beside him, ordering her to have a check made out to me. Then he shoed her out of the room.

"It wasn't too easy to locate her," I said. "She had covered her tracks, but I got some leads. Well, to make a long story short, Mr. Harrison, I have some pretty surprising news for you. You didn't murder your partner, Bill Rhodes. He's very much alive right now, hale, hearty,

and quite prosperous, I might add.”

A silence of stunning magnitude followed my little bombshell.

Harrison sat there, transfixed. Dr. Maxwell had turned pale. He was looking at me with an incredulous expression.

Harrison passed a trembling hand across his eyes: “I . . . I’m not sure I understood you correctly. You must have made some kind of mistake. Bill Rhodes is dead. He was burned alive in that fire. I saw his body—”

“I don’t know whose body you saw, but it wasn’t Bill Rhodes. We discussed that at some length. Bill thinks it must have been a bum, a wino perhaps, drifting through town, who hid in the office to keep warm that night. The light was on in one of the offices, it’s true. Bill said he had been there earlier and probably forgot to turn it off. But he’d left an hour before you set the place on fire. The body they found the next morning was burned beyond recognition. Everyone naturally thought it was Bill, so he hid out and let them go on thinking that.”

Harrison made a choking sound. “But why?” he gasped. “Why?”

“Same reason you had, Mr. Harrison. Insurance. Bill also had a large insurance policy on himself with his wife as beneficiary. He quietly slipped out of town while

his wife remained behind long enough to collect the insurance. Six months later, she joined him in another state. He invested the money in a new business and from the looks of things, he did even better than you. They have a lovely ranch-style home, belong to all the right clubs, even own a modest yacht. They have a fine son, by the way. The boy’s in high school now—”

“No!” Harrison’s voice was a strangled gasp. “No!” He rose from the wheelchair. I have never seen such a look of mingled horror and fury in the eyes of a human being. It was like glimpsing the poor tormented souls in purgatory. “You’re trying to tell me I threw my life away, tortured myself over nothing . . . only some nameless, wandering bum I never saw, never knew?” His voice was becoming a hysterical screech. His hands reached for my throat. It was fantastic that a man in his condition could have so much strength. If Dr. Maxwell hadn’t helped get his hands off me, I might have been strangled.

By then several nurses and orderlies had come in and were holding a screaming, sobbing, babbling John Harrison on the bed. I staggered out of the room, helped by Dr. Maxwell.

Maxwell’s face was pale with fury. “Scott, how could you have done such a stupid thing!”

I was rubbing my neck. "I thought the old buzzard would be happy to learn he hadn't killed his partner. Instead, he just about throttled me."

"What did you expect?" Maxwell raved. "How would you feel, a few weeks from your deathbed, being told that all those years of agonizing guilt were over nothing? It's unforgivable. Man, why didn't you tell me about this first? I never would have allowed you to give him that kind of information."

I shrugged. It was done now. There was no way to undo what I had told him.

I collected my check from Harrison's secretary and the matter was closed then, except for one more airplane trip I had to make to fulfill a promise.

The following afternoon, in another state many miles away, a taxi let me out in front of a run-down apartment house. In an upstairs efficiency, a faded little middle-aged woman, who might have once been very pretty, opened her door and welcomed me. She was Mary Rhodes, the widow of Bill Rhodes.

As I promised when I found her a few days ago, I had come back to tell her in detail the reaction of John Harrison to the story we'd made up. "I wonder if you did the right thing," I added. "The old guy doesn't have a whole lot of money left, but he probably would have given you what he had, if we'd told the truth."

The bitterness of the past fifteen years showed in her eyes. "I always suspected John Harrison started that fire, but there was no way I could prove it. I am not about to take that man's money now just so he can buy his guilty conscience a little last-minute peace. All the money in the world isn't worth the satisfaction of knowing the mental anguish he's going through this minute."

She made some fresh coffee, and we sat on a sofa near a window. "Now, Mr. Davis, I want you to tell me again, carefully, all the details. Especially that look on John Harrison's face. I so enjoy hearing about that."

"To tell the truth, I enjoyed telling about it."



If destiny is not written somewhere else, perhaps something can be arranged.

Murder, Anyone



IF IT WEREN'T for my wife I might never have hunched out the murders. There were four of them and a fifth was on the fire. Homicide didn't see anything that resembled homicide. They liked accident, mainly, except for the one that went into the books as suicide.

Though cops and robbers weren't my thing anymore, I liked to keep my brain in. When I was with the department I was no great shakes—just a digger who liked to play hunches. Now that I'm retired (not because of age, but due to a rich, departed uncle), I could play without being reprimanded.

The first so-called accident made no impression on me. It happened to a veterinarian who died because of a faulty gas heater. So what. You read about it all the time, right?

Then a carpenter gets his hand mixed up with an electric saw, in his own shop, yet. That doesn't happen too often to a professional carpenter. To an amateur, yes. Anyway, they found the poor guy two

by **Phil
Davis**

days later near the telephone, with his arm outstretched, apparently trying to reach the phone with the hand that was still attached.

I said to my friend at the precinct, "Something smells, Marty. A pro wouldn't go near one of those power saws without the safety guard in position. How come this one did?"

Marty was a shrugger. "Careless," he said.

I nodded, my brain acting like it still belonged in a detective's skull. It's possible that a carpenter could be careless, but before a person can get his hand sawed off, first the machine's got to be trying to saw something else besides hands, right? *There wasn't a hunk of wood anywhere near that sawing table.* "How come?" I asked Marty.

Marty gave me one of those tolerant, sighing looks. "He wasn't sawing any wood, Hank. He accidentally flipped the switch while his hand was on the table."

All right, that's an answer. I filed it away.

Then there was this druggist who was found cold in the back room of his store with a bellyful of cyanide. It was obviously suicide. If a druggist wants to go, he-knows how—fast and easy.

I didn't argue too much on that one. It was a fairly open-and-shut suicide, but one thing bothered me

that didn't seem to bother the department. *All three of these cash-ins happened on a Monday afternoon at around 4:30.*

Marty threw up his hands in disgust. "Why don't you go home," he said, "and watch the crime shows on television? Better yet, write some."

I ignored both suggestions. "Imagine that," I said, pressing the point. "Everything happens on a Monday afternoon at around four-thirty, a week or two apart. Funny, right?"

Marty didn't think it was funny. He admitted it was strange and gave me a lecture on the theory of coincidence. I'm a patient man. I didn't belabor it.

During one of my usual visits to the precinct, a report came in that a Mr. Adams, owner of the East Side Exterminating Company, choked on the fumes of some bug-killer he'd been mixing. I said to myself, *Mister Number Four?* I also thought, *Why not? It was a Monday, and it was around four-thirty in the afternoon.*

Nora was on her side of the bed trying to solve her weekly acrostic puzzle while I stared at the ceiling hoping maybe I'd find some answers up there. Mr. Adams, the exterminator, had been mixing formulas for twenty years, and all he

ever killed were bugs. Now he mixes some stuff which any high school chemistry student knows is lethal, and bye-bye, Mr. Adams. How come? Marty had told me, after the usual investigation, there was a mix-up of labels on the bottles. Another pro is careless? Come on . . .

Nora squealed: "I got it! I got it!"

Big deal—another acrostic puzzle solved.

"Listen to this, darling," she said. "This one is real profound."

I gave her my 'big-deal' attitude and said, "Do tell."

"Don't belittle me, darling. It was the hardest acrostic I ever worked."

I leered at her well-formed breasts pressing against her sheer nightgown. "Me, belittle you?"

She pulled the covers up to her chin. "Nervy," she said.

That's Nora, a regular square. I slid over to her side and asked her to read me the profound solution to the acrostic. She gave me a smug look and read: "To liquidate the liquidator, the insects must rise and devour the devourer the day next when the moon is full."

She waited for my reaction. I let her wait because I didn't understand it.

"Well?" she said, finally.

"What's so profound about that?"

"Don't you know what it means?"

"It's supposed to mean something?"

"It means that nature will some day rise up and destroy us all because we've been fiddling around with her entirely too much."

"Not bad," I said, grudgingly. "Like that little exterminator guy I was telling you about. All his life he mixes stuff to kill bugs—now the stuff kills *him*." I frowned. "That's a funny coincidence."

"What is?"

"Read that again."

She did, and this time I listened carefully. "To liquidate the liquidator, the insects must rise and devour the devourer the day next when the moon is full."

I nodded and wrinkled my forehead. "That bug-killer—his place is next to the Moon Cafe."

"So?"

"So he dies at four-thirty, *when the Moon is full—of beer drinkers*. The acrostic tells when it's gonna happen, where and to who."

"Whom," she corrected. Then she mimicked me with an icky face: "When the Moon is full of beer drinkers." That isn't worthy of you, Hank."

I grinned. "My wisdom can't all be pearls. But I still think it's a funny coincidence."

"Well, you're going to Teresa

Trimble's tomorrow night. You can ask her about it."

"Who's she?" I said, scowling.

"That's the little old lady who makes up the acrostics for the magazine."

My wife was giving me one of her teasing-type smiles, obviously enjoying the scowl I kept on my face. So I teased her back by removing the scowl and replacing it with a shruggy look. She couldn't stand it for long.

"Don't you want to know," she said, "how come we're going there tomorrow night?" Her tone revealed she had lost the tease contest.

"You're about to tell me, right?"

"Right. I sent her a fan letter and she invited us for dinner."

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling. "Great. A dinner date with an ancient female who makes up weirdo puzzles."

"She's a very remarkable woman. Do you know what she said in last week's acrostic? I memorized it. 'The walrus speaks of cabbages and the carpenter speaks not at all since he cannot be heard above the din.' You know what that means?"

I didn't wait for her to tell me. My hunchy brain was clicking like an overheated computer. I scrambled out of bed and made for Nora's desk. I heard her call out: "Hey!"

"I want to see all the other acrostics you worked out," I said, riffling through her papers.

"Welcome to the intelligentsia," she said smugly.

I sent her a wry look and went back to the puzzles. I found nothing that said anything about a druggist or a vet—not in those exact words—but there was enough to make me wonder about Miss Trimble. I looked forward to tomorrow's date.

We waited in the livingroom while Teresa Trimble flitted out for some goodies. Her place could have inspired a Charles Addams drawing: the mohair furniture, the beaded portieres, the antimacassars, and the faint aroma of rose sachet. I was about to tell Nora the room gave me the creeps, when she said: "Isn't it charming, Hank?"

What can you say to a question like that? So I nodded and let her believe it was charming.

Miss Trimble minced in through the beaded portieres carrying a tray of watercress sandwiches and three small glasses of wine. She was a tiny, birdlike woman, about seventy. "This is such a joyous occasion for me," she said in a voice that rustled as if it were filtered through some willows.

"We were so happy to be able to come," Nora said with a stickiness that might have attracted a swarm



of bees. "Monday is usually Hank's poker night."

I nodded with a suffering oh-what-I-gave-up! look.

Miss Trimble rushed on. "Well, when I got your gracious letter complimenting my acrostics I just *knew* I had to meet you. And when you accepted my humble invitation—" She broke off, staring at Nora with a semiglazed look. Then slowly she reached out and touched her cheek. "You're so young," she said softly. "So fresh—" She halted abruptly as a thought developed. "Oh, I have a wonderful idea! I'll just be a minute!" She turned and floated out. I started to browse.

"Stop fidgeting," Nora whispered. "It won't destroy you to miss your poker game one night."

By this time I was at the secretary-desk in a corner going through an assortment of papers. Nora reprimanded me sharply. "Hank, you just can't come into this woman's home and start going through—"

"Listen to this . . ." It was a galley proof of next week's acrostic. "Green is his trade though many shades of yellow are his wares. Black is the nature of his soul, and death finds repose in pale pink."

Nora's eyes flashed. "Hank, you can't—"

"How do I look?" Miss Trimble's voice caused us to whirl. She'd changed into a gown of a vintage of

fifty years ago, pausing in the portiere and striking a pose as if asking for admiration.

I managed, "Exquisite. Like a Dresden doll, Miss Trimble."

"What a nice thing to say, Mr. Barnes. It's been fifty years since I wore this dress. It has wonderful memories." She gave Nora a warm, tender look. "And seeing you reminded me of all those young yesterdays." Her glance fell on the tray she'd brought in. "Oh, you haven't tasted my sandwiches. They won't interfere with your dinner—they're very light." A note of sadness crept into her voice. "Although I'm afraid the watercress is a bit of a disappointment. It isn't as crisp as it should have been." Now her face turned a shade cunning. "My greengrocer's been neglecting me. I'm going to have to change him."

There went my brain clicking again. "Your greengrocer?"

She gave me a pleasant nod, then picked up a glass of wine and raised it to Nora. "I want to drink a toast to you, Mrs. Barnes. To beauty—who has found faith in a lost art." She lifted her glass to her lips when her attention was attracted to an empty bird cage hanging on a tall stand nearby. Her eyes clouded and she stood silently gazing at it for a couple of seconds. She caught our puzzled reaction. "I lost Jonathan three weeks ago today," she ex-

plained. "The veterinarian was so careless." She extended the tray. "Now, won't you try one of these? You'll find them refreshing."

I reached for a sandwich and accidentally knocked over a glass of wine which spilled on the rug.

"Oh, Hank—" Nora began, chidingly.

"I'm sorry, Miss Trimble." I stooped down to mop it up with a paper napkin, but Miss Trimble stopped me.

"Don't worry, Mr. Barnes," she said. "Moths got to my rug long before that little glass of wine. The exterminator was preparing a special solution, but apparently the moths were smarter than he."

From my stooped position, I looked up at her and said cautiously, "Would that happen to be an exterminator who had his place on East 47th Street?"

She reacted with a surprised smile. "Why, yes, Mr. Barnes. Do you use Mr. Adams, too?"

I rose slowly. "No," I said. "And I don't think Mr. Adams is in a position to take on any more business."

Nora swiveled her stare from me to Miss Trimble with dismay.

In my sleep I heard myself repeating: "Green is his trade though many shades of yellow are his wares. Green is his trade—"

Then I heard Miss Trimble's

voice saying: "My greengrocer's been neglecting me. I'm going to have to change him."

"Green is his trade—"

"I'm going to have to change him—"

I awoke sharply and cried out: "Oh, no!" I turned and started to shake Nora. "Honey . . . Sweetheart . . . Baby!"

She offered me her glaze-filled eyes.

"I've got it!" I yelled. Then added in a lower voice: "I'm afraid."

Nora yawned in my face and said, "You've got what? You're afraid?"

"I think that weirdo Trimble dame is going to change her greengrocer, all right. She's going to change him from a live one to a dead one." I reached for the telephone on the night stand.

"It's not a coincidence, Marty," I said. "All your accidental deaths are tied in with these acrostics." Nora refilled our coffee cups.

"Three-thirty," Marty muttered dazedly. "In the morning yet."

Nora nodded in agreement. "Imagine—popovers, at three-thirty a.m."

"And very good, too," Marty said with a mouthful. "I'll have another."

I waved a handful of solved

acrostics under his nose. "Remember the veterinarian who died because of a faulty gas heater? I'll bet you'll find he took care of Miss Trimble's bird with the broken wing. And the exterminator who fought a losing battle with the moths in her rug." I rifled through the stuff. "It's all here—the carpenter, the druggist. And I'm warning you, Marty, next Monday at four-thirty a greengrocer's going to die."

Marty sighed. "Do me a favor, Hank? What the hell is a greengrocer?"

Nora leaped in with her super-intellect. "A man who sells fruits and vegetables." Then she attacked me with her superlogic. "We had dinner with her last night, Hank. Did she act like a woman who committed four murders in as many weeks? And if she did, why lay it out in an acrostic puzzle?"

"Who is this dame?" Marty wanted to know. "A Lucrezia de Bergerac? A master criminal? I don't get it, but I've played your hunches before and you've been right, so I'll go along with you now. Just don't tell my boss."

"Right." I turned to my wife. "Nora . . ." She was asleep on her feet, so I did what any red-blooded ex-detective husband would do under the circumstances. I yelled in her ear. "Nora!"

Her head snapped back, and she spouted: "A greengrocer is a man who sells fruits and—"

She broke off at the sight of my grin. "You told us that before, dear," I said patronizingly. "What we need to know now is *which* greengrocer is going to be the next victim."

I gave her the assignment.

Nora was a good operative. Teresa Trimble's greengrocer was a frail little man by the name of Pincus. His store was on Lexington Avenue not far from Miss Trimble's apartment. The customers called him Pink, as in the last sentence of the acrostic: *Death finds repose in pale pink*.

The following Monday Marty and I staked out Pink's place. At about four-fifteen, Miss Trimble materialized on the sidewalk and glided into the store. We got out of the car and paused at the entrance. We heard Mr. Pincus greet Miss Trimble warmly. She wanted to know if her mushrooms were ready. "You promised me, Pink," she said in that wispy voice. "Today . . . Monday . . . 4:30. Remember?"

"Of course," Pincus said. "I haven't had a light on in the cellar all week. They should be beautiful. I'll just be a minute."

Mr. Pincus went through a back door and we went in through the

front. Miss Trimble was surprised. "Why, Mr. Barnes," she said, "how nice to see you. Are you going to buy some of Mr. Pincus' mushrooms?"

"Not exactly." I introduced Marty.

"So nice to meet you, Mr. Gordon."

Marty said, "Thanks."

Miss Trimble turned to a display of persimmons. "Mr. Pincus says it bruises his persimmons to squeeze them. But how else can you tell if they're ripe?" She gave one a delicate pinch and tossed me a conspiratorial smile. "He'll never know."

Miss Trimble went back to examining the persimmons, giving them a pinch here, a pinch there. A clock on the wall ticked ominously. It was obviously fast. Then, after what seemed to be a short forever, I checked my watch and glanced at Marty: "What time've you got?"

Before Marty could answer, Miss Trimble turned from the persimmons and told us: "It's four-thirty."

It was the way she said it that caused Marty and me to exchange a couple of alarmed looks. Enough for Marty to scoot out the back door.

"It was so sweet of Mrs. Barnes," Miss Trimble was saying, "to drop by last Wednesday. I gave her some

of my special jasmine tea. I have such a wonderful tea man—"

I glanced nervously toward the rear door. "She told me," I said.

"She's so young and pretty," Miss Trimble went on. "You're a very lucky man, Mr. Barnes. If I had my way she'd never grow old."

I caught sight of a magazine on a counter beside her. It was the same one Nora subscribed to—the one with the acrostic puzzles. Before I could question her about it, Marty came in from the rear room, his features frozen in shock.

"He's dead," Marty said with complete disbelief.

Miss Trimble looked concerned. "But what about my mushrooms?" she said.

Inspector Crowley, a fat, florid, perspiring cop with a nervous habit of cracking his knuckles, was questioning Miss Trimble in her apartment. I had to hand it to her, the way she sat so calm and controlled.

Crowley cracked a knuckle and said: "Tell me again, Miss Trimble, what was the meaning of the acrostic—" He started to read from a copy: "Green is his trade, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera—?"

"I wish you wouldn't do that," Miss Trimble said.

"It's my job to ask questions."

"I didn't mean that. I meant crack your knuckles."

Crowley flashed Marty and me an irky look. With Crowley's permission, I took over the questioning. "Didn't your acrostic contain a warning to Mr. Pincus?"

"A warning?" she said innocently. "About what?"

I repeated the acrostic: "Green is his trade though many shades of yellow are his wares." I gave her my interpretation. "That means he was a greengrocer, but sold yellow stuff like bananas, squash, pears, and so on. Right?"

"That's a very interesting interpretation, Mr. Barnes," she said impressed.

I went on. "Black is the nature of his soul.' Was that your way of saying you disliked him?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Barnes. I was just sorry he disappointed me in the watercress, that's all. Actually, I was very fond of Pink."

I nodded. "Pink. Death finds repose in pale pink." I put on one of my friendliest faces. "Now, Miss Trimble, didn't you intend that 'to be a threat'?"

"The text," she said simply, "of each of my acrostics is always controversial. That's why they're so successful. Everyone finds his own meaning in them."

"What's yours?"

"I just like the way they sound."

Marty put his two cents in. "Did you like the way it sounded when

Pincus slipped on those cellar steps and cracked his head open on the cement floor?"

"I didn't hear anything," she said sweetly.

It was Crowley's turn. "You got into that cellar, waxed those steps, and unscrewed the light bulb—didn't you?"

Marty pounced in with: "And what about the exterminator? Did you slip into his back room and prepare the solution that killed him?"

"And the vet," Crowley barked. "The one you took your bird to. Did you open the jet on his gas heater while he took his afternoon nap?"

"And the carpenter—"

"The druggist—"

They suddenly stopped the interrogation to stare at Miss Trimble as she took out a little pillbox from a table drawer, and poured some water from a carafe.

"I can't remember," she said, "when I've had such a stimulating evening." She opened the pillbox and extended it to us. "Peppermint?"

Nora let out three "Oh's," one after another. The first one came when I handed her a special delivery letter. It was an "Oh" filled with wonder. Like if it were for me I'd say: "Oh? Who the hell would send me a special delivery?" But

my wife's a lady. The second "Oh" was one of surprise when I told her that the letter was from the little old acrostic banana. The third "Oh" came when she opened the envelope and read the note. "An advance copy," it said, "of my next acrostic. I sincerely hope you can solve it." She frowned at me. "Why do you suppose she did that?"

I wasn't in the mood for supposing. I grabbed the acrostic and hightailed it to Center Street where they have computers that decipher cryptograms, coded messages and all kinds of stuff like that.

The computer solved the puzzle in three minutes flat, but as smart as that machine was, it couldn't give me an interpretation. When it comes to interpretations my wife and I are smarter than machines.

I showed it to Nora and she drew a blank.

I read it over and over: *X plus too much Y equals death, since neither a found hope nor a lost faith can halt the hour of doom where the sun declines.* I gave Nora a worried look. "I'm batting zero."

"You're in a slump, darling," she said. "Maybe you ought to bench yourself."

I repeated the beginning: "*X plus too much Y equals death.*" Read the next line, honey." I closed my eyes and listened.

"... *since neither a found hope*

nor a lost faith— Got that, love?"

I repeated it slowly. "—since neither a found hope, nor a lost faith—" I opened my eyes. "What do you suppose she means, 'a found hope'?"

"What about 'a lost faith'?"

"Yeah. A lost faith. A found hope."

"You can't accuse her of using bad grammar," Nora said.

"What's that got to do with it?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Nothing. Just that she was very grammatical. She didn't say 'neither or,' she said 'neither *nor*.'"

I felt the hairs on the back of my neck getting bristly. I repeated the line. "—neither a found hope nor a lost faith." I droned on: "Neither a found hope—neither a found hope—neither a found hope—" I switched to: "—nor a lost faith—nor a lost faith—nor a—" I screamed it. "Nora!"

Nora almost jumped out of her chair. "What?"

"Nora lost faith!"

Nora gulped and said very faintly, "Me?"

The cops were in our livingroom Monday afternoon. Nora sat on the edge of the couch looking very unhappy. "What am I supposed to do," she complained, "just sit here and wait for the hour of doom?" She pointed to her watch. "That's

a scanty five minutes from now.”

I said, “Relax, baby.”

Crowley said, “There’s nothing to worry about, Mrs. Barnes. We’ve got men stationed all over this building and a stake-out at Miss Trimble’s.”

Marty said, “Of all the cases I’ve been on, this is the wackiest. X plus too much Y equals a pain in the neck.”

“For your information, Marty,” I said, “the X refers to me as an ex-detective. And too much Y means I’ve asked too many questions. Which adds up to—”

Marty signed me off with: “I know, I know. But what about that ‘hour of doom where the sun declines’?”

I wasn’t too sure about that part of the acrostic. I figured it was Miss Trimble’s way of telling us the action would take place around four-thirty. At this time of the year that’s about when the sun declines.

The phone rang and Crowley went to answer it. Nora was hoping it was a reprieve from the governor. One of the men who’d been staked out around Miss Trimble’s building told us that she had left thirty seconds ago. Nora reacted with a sick gulp and made with a sick joke. “Murder, anyone?”

We checked the time. My watch said 4:30; Marty’s, 4:29; Crowley had 4:31.

We waited . . . and waited . . . and waited. Zero.

At 5:30 the phone rang again. The report was that Miss Trimble just got back to the house. It seems she’d only gone on a little shopping tour.

Marty and Crowley told me off. They’d had enough of my shadow-chasing. Nora told me off, too. She’d had enough of cops, threats and my profound acrostic interpretations and brain-damaged hunches. I told myself off, then sat in a corner nursing my wounds.

My wife being the kind of wife she is, soothed my ego with a “can’t-win-’em-all” type of remark, kissed the back of my neck, and sent me off to my Monday night poker game. I was glad to go.

It was 7:20 when I left the building. *Had I waited until 7:30 I might have met Teresa Trimble coming in.*

The poker game was at George Bogin’s place, a couple of blocks away. His wife was in L.A. so he started the game early. I got there in five minutes.

George looked at me in surprise. “Hey, I thought you weren’t coming. I called Nate to take your place.”

Nate said, “I’d give you my seat, Hank, but I’m out a hundred and fifty big ones.”

“Forget it,” I said. “I’ll kibitz a while.”

George looked at his watch. "I promised to call my wife at four-thirty, Hank," he said. "You can take my seat. She'll keep me on the phone for an hour."

I laughed. "You're a little late. It's seven-thirty now."

He got up from the table and I sat down.

"Four-thirty L.A. time," George explained. "You know Vera. Everything belongs to her. 'Call me at four-thirty my time.' You think she'd say, 'Call me at seven-thirty your time'? No. *Her* time. I gotta add the three-hour difference to her time and subtract it from my time. To make a telephone call I gotta be a mathematician." He slapped my shoulder. "It's a lucky seat."

I picked up a pat straight to the king and my head was buzzing with a jumble of acrostics. The boys were asking me if I could open. I heard myself say, "—The hour of doom where the sun declines—*where the sun declines!*" The stark realization hit me like a ten-ton truck. *That dame laid it out! It was 4:30 in the West!* I jumped with a convulsive motion that sent the chips flying, and leaped for the door, leaving a bunch of surprised poker players.

I don't know how long it took me to cover the distance from George's to my apartment, but when I skidded into the lobby I had very

little breath left; just enough to breathe a prayer of thanks that the elevator was there waiting.

I punched the button for the 12th floor and nothing happened. "Dammit, move!" I punched it again and again. Zero. I lunged for the stairs.

I used to be a fairly good runner in my day, but a mountain climber I never was. Twelve floors to me was a mountain. I ran up that mountain like I'd been doing it for years. I'm still not a mountain climber—a mountain runner, yes.

I made the 12th floor corridor in time to see Miss Trimble holding a small pistol on Nora in front of the elevator door. Only there was no elevator there—just a deep, empty shaft.

Nora's face was frozen in terror. She didn't see me. Her wide eyes were leveled at the barrel of the gun. Miss Trimble didn't see me either—she was too wrapped up in her game of murder. Needless to say I had to be careful. If I made too much of a thing, the gun might go off or Nora might be shoved down the shaft. Or both.

Miss Trimble was saying: "One so young, so fresh, so pretty, should never grow old. But I'm glad I can prevent that." Her face turned to a pout. "Though you did disappoint me. You shouldn't have permitted your charming husband to ask so many questions. You lost faith,

Nora. Don't you see that now?"

I moved along the corridor very slowly, thanking the landlord for the thick carpeting. I hoped Miss Trimble didn't hear the wheeze of my breath.

"This is so exciting," she went on. "Composing acrostics used to be dull and uninteresting until I thought of this game. You know, my dear, I wasn't sure I could outwit your husband—but I did." She raised the gun a little higher. Nora's terror-stricken eyes followed it. "Step in, dear," she said. "Just another accident. It wasn't difficult for me to fix that door and still have the elevator go down. A metal contact, that's all. And now the elevator won't even go up. I'm very good at arranging things." She urged her gently. "Take one small step back, dear. Go on—"

Nora was now at the edge of the shaft. So how do you handle it? No time to figure a plan.

"Well, hello, Miss Trimble," I said very quietly.

Nora gasped, and Miss Trimble turned and gave me a surprised, welcome look. "Why, Mr. Barnes,"

she said. "How nice that we meet again."

I advanced slowly, walking on eggs. The gun was on me. "You look exquisite in that dress," I said. "Like a Dresden doll." I repeated with a little more emphasis: "—a *Dresden doll*."

She was no longer with it. "What a nice thing to say," she said mechanically. "It's been fifty years since I wore this dress . . . It has such—"

Very gently I took the gun from her. She didn't even notice.

"It has such wonderful . . . memories."

Nora swayed. I moved quickly past Miss Trimble and extended my arm to keep her from falling backward into the empty shaft.

"Easy, baby," I said under my breath. Then, in my most suave tone, I said, "We're having Miss Trimble in for tea."

"That reminds me," Miss Trimble said. "My tea man mixed some orange pekoe in my jasmine. He shouldn't have done that."

I agreed with her as we led her to our apartment door.



One could call this an excellent example of "fair trade."



Once Upon a Pheasant Hunt



MY IMMEDIATE farm chores accomplished that cold, sunny February morning, I put on a sweater, lighted my pipe, and walked outside the house with the dog. I looked across the prairie to the south and saw dust clouds rising in the distance above the narrow, dirt farm-road, and heard the noisy engine of a car laboring under the throttle. It made a right turn, swerving dangerously onto our hard-surfaced road, and I recognized it as my neighbor Tolan's old four-door sedan, and saw the anguished faces of his two sons, Cob

and Husker, in the front seat. I waved, but they didn't see me as they barreled hell-bent for home.

I put the dog back in the house, and while I was contemplating driving my truck to the Tolans' farm I saw their car racing back toward my place. The boys had picked up their dad, and Husker braked to a stop at my gate, the engine pounding. The back door flew open as Cappy Tolan, his face grim, gestured frantically.

"Cash!" he shouted. "Would you please go with us out to Dupree's house? Something terrible hap-

pened when the boys went out there to go pheasant hunting in his shelterbelt."

I jumped in beside Cappy, the car lunging forward before I man-



by F.C. REGISTER

aged to close the door. "Is somebody hurt? Shot?" I probed.

"Good night!" he groaned. "I hope not. The boys' cousin was with them and deliberately killed one of the horses. Cob and Husker panicked and left him out there."

With trepidation I contemplated the two shotguns at my feet, wondering if they were loaded. I considered the possibility of these blond, stalwart, teen-aged brothers being involved in a grave situation, finally concluding that all I really

knew about them was that they were studious, obedient.

As Husker managed to turn the car back onto the potholed road, the guns bounced on the floor. I carefully placed both feet on them as Cappy muttered in disgust, "I'm going to damn well deep-six those guns when we get home."

I had considered Dupree a kind of loner and tried unsuccessfully to remember the reason he'd given, a few years back, when he'd refused to permit my two sons, now in military service, to hunt pheasants in his shelter.

On the bumpy road, my apprehensions mounting, I pieced together fragments of what had occurred a few minutes earlier, as the boys excitedly recounted the events.

"We had stopped the car at the tall row of trees in the middle of the shelter," Cob related dejectedly, as he squared around to face his dad. "Muncie wanted to be the 'stopper,' the point man, while me and Husk would walk abreast through the trees and flush the birds. We said OK, if he would go and ask Mr. Dupree for permission."

"Why didn't all of you go and ask him?" demanded Cappy.

"I don't know, Dad." Cob frowned. "He never seemed friendly or anything when we would see him in town."

Turning to Cappy, I interrupted. "Is Muncie your brother's or your sister's son?"

"My brother's seventeen-year-old kid," he grimaced. "We didn't know he was in town. His dad had told me never to let him have a gun, but he brought one with him, a double-barreled shotgun. Said he bought it himself."

I had never met young Muncie. Was he hotheaded, malicious? The tragic aspect of the wanton slaughter of the horse increased my misgivings, and I knew that my underlying dread was that the youngster, being denied hunting privileges in the posted area, had run amok.

"Gee, Dad," Husker said ruefully, gripping the vibrating steering wheel, "it's hard to believe what Muncie did. He just walked out of the house directly to the corral and killed the horse."

"We saw him," Cob said, his voice on edge. "Muncie stuck the gun muzzle through the fence and blasted away. It was a white horse and it just keeled over."

"Did you see Muncie go into the house?" Cappy asked. "Did you see him talking to Dupr e? Tell me everything that happened."

"Muncie must have been talking to somebody, Dad, at the front door," replied Husker. "We couldn't see who it was. Then he picked up his gun and went inside."

"It seemed like he was in the house a long time," Cob cut in. "We waited and waited, and then he came out the back door. He never looked down the road where we were parked, he just walked to the corral."

Evidently, that was all the boys had to say.

Cappy Tolan seemed to shrivel as I glanced at him in the rear-view mirror. What had happened just an hour ago when three kids had gone out to try and bag a couple of ring-necks? Would we find tragedy at the end of this miserable road?

As the old car neared Dupr e's place, my nerves tense, my booted feet holding down the shotguns on the floor, I shrugged away my compassion and felt compelled to ask the boys a question—a vital one their father had refrained from asking.

"Cob," I blurted, "did you guys hear a shot fired while your cousin was in the house?"

"No . . ." he pondered thoughtfully. "Nothing that sounded like it. Did you hear anything, Husk?"

"We heard no sound from the house, Mr. Cash," answered Husker. "We were upwind, though, and quite a distance away."

Husker slowed the old car as we approached the shelterbelt and stopped when we reached the tall trees in the center. Apprehensively,

we eyed the area around us and the dead-end road to Dupree's farm some two hundred yards ahead.

"I don't see anybody," said Cappy, his voice taut. "Touch the horn."

Husker pressed the horn button twice, and shouted, "Muncie, Muncie!"

In a few moments, Muncie strolled out of the back yard and stood at the edge of the road. He had no gun and, hands on hips, he stood watching us.

"Let's go!" shouted Cappy. "Drive on to the house."

As the car stopped again, I glanced through the corral fence and saw a blood-splattered gray horse lying on the ground, and my sorrow deepened for the Tolan family.

Cappy jumped out of the car first. "What the hell have you done out here, Muncie?" he shrieked vindictively.

"Why . . . nothing," faltered the boy. "Nothing at all, Uncle Cappy."

Resolutely Muncie faced his cousins. "Where did you run off to? When Mr. Dupree said it was OK to hunt, I went on to the point and waited, then I saw you take off."

"You killed the horse!" Cob cried derisively.

"Muncie, where is Mr. Dupree?" demanded Cappy. "Tell me!"

We heard a barn door slam and saw the husky farmer walking toward us. Dressed in faded overalls and carrying a shovel, he squinted at us. "Well, hello there, Cappy. And here's Cash, too," he greeted. "Don't see much of you fellows anymore." He speared the ground with the shovel and rested a foot on the blade. "I'm out here alone now, you know. Glad to have these youngsters come out and hunt."

"But the horse?" queried Cappy, with a quick glance at the corral. "What happened over there?"

"Oh, yes . . . old Nell," sighed Dupree, leaning on the shovel. He placed a freckled hand on Muncie's shoulder. "I hope this young fellow realizes he's done a humane thing today. When he asked permission to hunt here with your boys, I figured it was a godsend, so I made a deal with him. Old Nell was suffering so much—the veterinarian said she was wind-broken, had the heaves, you know—and I just didn't have the courage to do it myself."

There was an awed silence. Muncie went back to the yard, picked up his gun and headed for the car. I followed the Tolans, leaving Dupree standing there, misty eyes on the corral.

Perhaps it is true, as the ancient philosophers urged, that nothing is so difficult but that it may be found by seeking.



KING'S POST

THE CASE which had taken Geoffrey Fleming to Atlanta isn't relevant here. The important thing is that he had handled it with a finesse sure to please his client, and had finished two days ahead of schedule, which meant he could take his time getting back to his New York detective agency.

Sprawling his six-foot, two-inch frame across the bed in a motel room outside Atlanta, he studied the road maps littering his rug. If he took 20 to Columbia, he could pick up I-95 near Florence.

Idly, Geoff moved his finger across the map, following I-95 northward, when suddenly a name in the jumble of small print jumped out at him: *King's Post*. From deep in his memory, he saw a small

proud chin tilt defiantly and heard her scornful words, "My husband won't need you anymore, Mr. Fleming. I'll go back to King's Post without a fight now."

The caliber of his clientele made the society pages part of Geoff's re-

quired reading, so he knew that Sarah King Wyndom had kept her word after an overnight flight to Mexico. A new Mrs. Wyndom graced the society pages now—heading committees, patronizing the newest galleries, hostessing chic parties in a glare of flashbulbs the first Mrs. Wyndom would not tolerate.

After that final telephone call to the Wyndoms' Fifth Avenue penthouse, Geoff had advised Wyndom that there was nothing he could do that the FBI wouldn't do more thoroughly. It had eased his professional pride somewhat when they failed, too; eight years without a trace of the kidnappers.

Geoff computed the distance to King's Post. Sarah Wyndom had thought him an enemy, but Geoff had admired her courage then and occasionally he would think of her and wonder if life had since been

He had driven over to Wyndom's that winter day feeling confident that he could handle any problem a self-made millionaire might have.

The penthouse sprawled over two floors and was jarringly modern. The rooms flowed into each other and crisp winter sunshine flooded in on all sides, but the effect was one of coldness. It was an expensive exercise, executed by a professional decorator, and Geoff had to admit it suited its owner.

Philip Wyndom was as brittle and cold as his penthouse, with a similar air of cool efficiency. He was the type of man who wouldn't deny his background, but he would make sure the subject never came up. There had been no jovial ethnic childhood—only a dreary, grinding poverty from which he'd escaped as soon as possible and which impelled him to step on any fingers necessary

by Margaret E. Brown

kinder. There was something else he had wondered about back then: that oddity about the ransom, a minor point which no one else had thought important. Maybe she would remember.

Geoff gathered up the maps and folded them, but his mind was drifting back eight years into the past.

in order to stay in his dazzling white penthouse. Success had not mellowed his drive.

Only by an occasional awkward turn of phrase and an almost imperceptible accent did Wyndom's speech betray his origins. Geoff was no snob, but after the first formalities were over and he was seated in

a white velvet chair with a glass of his favorite bourbon, he found himself listening for the verbal slips with sadistic satisfaction.

He didn't like Wyndom and he didn't like Wyndom's proposition. Not that he was above handling divorce cases. On principle, Geoff deplored that the courts automatically awarded huge alimonies and any children to the wife. If an innocent client were being taken to the cleaners by a greedy and vindictive spouse, he would agree to dig out her possible indiscretions, but he had never stooped to manufacturing evidence, and Wyndom's millions weren't likely to change his ethics.

As Geoff waited for a chance to tell him so, he wondered if Wyndom realized how much of himself he was revealing. Fifteen minutes after meeting him, Geoff was willing to bet that Wyndom had loved only three things in his life: money, acknowledged power, and his four-year-old son.

Money he had, but he felt that his hold on the last two were undermined by his wife. Financial power was not enough; Wyndom wanted to be a mover in society, too. Turn-of-the-century, blue-blooded society did not interest him; lineage was a dead issue, anyhow. Talent, money and original variations in spending that money, that's what

carried someone to the top of the city's new society.

"Look at that man whose fortune's based on frozen pizza! His wife hired a pop sculptor to carve her nude figure from a wheel of Wisconsin cheddar and then sliced it up for hors d'oeuvres at a cocktail party after the unveiling! It made every magazine in the country."

Not that he expected his wife Sarah to copy such vulgarity, but did Geoff see his point? A wife's cooperation was necessary.

Geoff saw quite clearly. From Wyndom's description, Mrs. Wyndom was emerging as an anemic puritan with a coldness to match her husband's.

Wyndom despised her ladylike breeding—"She's related to the Virginia Fowlers, you know"—and he had already picked her successor, a vibrant divorcée, heiress to a pickle fortune, who reveled in the spotlight and knew how to do "fun things with money." All his present wife wanted was to pour his money down a drain at some settlement house in the East Village. "Where's the class in settlement houses?"

Geoff pictured a plain-Jane, Lady Bountiful in a proper tailored suit, hardly the type to interest photographers and the new elite.

"And she doesn't believe in divorce?" he asked politely.

"Oh, she'll give me a divorce,"

said Wyndom bitterly. "She doesn't even want alimony, just my son. She thinks I'm giving him a distorted sense of values. My son!

"And these hidebound judges! You've got to prove the mother's a complete tramp before they'll give a child to his father. We've both been too careful to give the other grounds for getting custody of King and it's a stalemate."

This was where Geoff was to come in. Wyndom wanted him to sprout a beard and love beads, infiltrate the settlement and either dig up or manufacture evidence that his wife was unfit to gain custody of an impressionable child.

"The area's loaded with hopheads and hippies. Maybe you can persuade a couple of 'em to testify that they've seen her take drugs."

Before Geoff could tell him what he could do with that proposition, a telephone across the room rang softly.

As Wyndom answered it, his voice took on a rising note of irritation. "Control yourself, Aunt Hitty, you're not making sense. He *what*? When? Did you check by the entrance? Well look, dammit! No, I'm not yelling at you. Just find him and come home!"

He hung up the receiver with controlled anger. "That settles it!" he said. "Absentminded old fool! This time she goes."

A door closed in the vestibule and Geoff discarded all his preconceptions as Sarah Wyndom entered the room.

There was nothing anemic about her. In black stretch pants, red sweater and a bulky sheepskin jacket, she stood about five-two, and black, shoulder-length waves escaped from the jacket's hood to brush against her cheeks, which were red from the winter chill outside. She was younger than he'd expected and her eyes were large and smoky, but then she spoke and Geoff suspected iron behind those vulnerable eyes.

"What's Aunt Hitty done to displease you now?" Her voice was clear and low, with only a slight hint of magnolias and hushpuppies.

"She's let King get away from her again," her husband said coldly. "Tomorrow, I'm hiring a proper nursemaid. I'll not trust my son to that half dotty, nearsighted imbecile another day."

"Perhaps if you showed Aunt Hitty more respect, King wouldn't play tricks on her," she murmured as she unzipped her jacket and swung it over one shoulder. Her eyes rested on Geoff impersonally, but she did not seem to expect an introduction and Wyndom did not offer one.

She hesitated a moment in the doorway. "At least let me be the

one to tell her." When Wyndom turned away without answering, she shrugged, then ran up the spiraling steel staircase and along the landing to disappear behind a large white door.

"My apologies for that scene, but she's entrusted my son to an ancient family relic of hers who's—" Wyndom broke off as the phone rang again. "Hello?" he said impatiently. "Who is this?"

Suddenly he whirled, and with his hand over the mouthpiece, he hissed at Geoff, "Quick! Pick up the kitchen extension!"

Geoff darted down the hallway Wyndom had indicated and into the kitchen, but as he picked up the phone he heard Mrs. Wyndom on an upstairs extension. "Philip, what did he mean? What will he do to King?"

As Geoff returned to the livingroom, he saw her skimming down the steps, her eyes wide with fear, but Wyndom ignored her and asked curtly, "Did you hear, Fleming?"

"Sorry, he hung up too quickly. What were the terms?" Geoff could put two and two together as well as anyone.

"Fifteen thousand in twenties. No cops. He'll call back later with more instructions." His voice was unemotional repeating the kidnapper's terms but his eyes were ven-

omous as he stared at his wife.

A key rattled in the door and a tiny white-haired figure, heavily bundled against the cold, pattered into the room. Her dainty head was thrust forward as if weighted down by the thick glasses on her nose and her pale blue eyes peered myopically around the room.

"Didn't King come back yet?" At last Geoff heard the rich southern drawl he'd expected Mrs. Wyndom to possess.

Angrily, Wyndom advanced on the old lady, but Sarah stepped between them. "Let me, Philip; you'll only scare her into a heart attack."

Gently, she led the old woman over to a couch. "Sit down, darling, and tell me what happened."

"Well, King told me he had to—" She broke off and blinked at the two men. To Geoff's amazement, she was blushing as she lowered her voice and bent her birdlike head closer to Sarah's. "You know how he's smart as paint, always asking what the letters spell?"

Sarah nodded encouragement.

"Well, he got it in his little head that he was too grownny for the Ladies' anymore. Pitched a pure fit to go in the Men's. I *told* him he couldn't manage by himself with his snowsuit on, but a nice young man said he'd go in with King and help."

"What did he look like?" Wyndom barked.

"I couldn't see him too well, but he had a young voice. Real nice and polite, he was," Aunt Hitty offered hopefully.

"Then what?" Sarah prodded gently.

"Nothing, dear. He never came back. I even asked another boy to go look, but he said no one was there. I thought for certain he'd jump out and try to scare me—are you *sure* he's not here?"

"You fool! You doddering old senile fool!" Wyndom's words stung like an arctic blast. "You've let my son be kidnapped, perhaps murdered!"

"Philip, don't!" Sarah Wyndom cried; but she was too late.

Aunt Hitty whimpered as his words lashed her. "Kidnapped? King murdered?" With a small gasp, she crumpled to the floor.

The next half hour was frenzied as a doctor and ambulance arrived to rush her off to a nearby hospital. At seventy, Mehitabel Fowler's heart had already suffered two attacks and the doctor did not hold out much hope.

"If she dies, Philip, it will be your fault," Sarah said, pulling on her jacket.

"And if King dies?" Wyndom retorted icily.

Their eyes locked; then Sarah followed the stretcher down the hallway.

Geoff closed the door behind her and looked at Wyndom, who stood by one of the long glass walls watching the pale winter sun slant over the park. "Do you want me to call the police?"

Wyndom turned and stared at him blankly, then seemed to focus on Geoff's words. "Police? Absolutely not! When King's safe, I'll take the wretch apart; but right now, I won't risk it. He said he had someone in the building watching."

"He may be bluffing," Geoff said.

"I tell you I won't risk King's life!" Wyndom snapped with finality. He strode across the white rug into a spacious office area where a long slab of clear lucite served as a desk, and wrote out a check for \$15,000. "Take this down to my bank and get the money in twenties."

When Geoff returned, the money inside an attaché case, he found Mrs. Wyndom curled up in a chair. Her dark eyes widened at the sight of him over her coffee cup and she turned to Wyndom with a frown.

"If he's going to remain, Philip, don't you think it's time you introduced us?"

"Mr. Fleming, my wife, Mrs. Wyndom," he said, then added coolly, "Fleming's a private detective."

Her cup clattered in its saucer as she uncurled her body. "A detec-

tive! And here *before* King was kidnapped? Philip, if this is one of your maneuvers to get custody of King—”

“I assure you, my dear, he was called in for quite a different reason,” Wyndom answered evenly.

Comprehension flared in her eyes and she looked at Geoff with distaste as Wyndom continued, “I don’t have to kidnap my son to get custody of him. When we catch the bum, we’ll probably find he’s one of *your* protégés from the Village.”

“Bickering won’t help us get King home safely,” she said, her dark eyes unhappy as she leaned back. “Just promise you won’t let him do anything to frighten the kidnapper.”

“He won’t,” Wyndom said.

Annoyed at being referred to like an inanimate object, Geoff stood up and said, “At least we could be ready for action after you get your son back. Mrs. Wyndom, the police will want a description of his clothes and a recent photograph; Mr. Wyndom, you can draw up a list of anyone who might bear a grudge against you or your wife.”

“Those Village hippies—” Wyndom began.

Geoff cut him short, “A complete stranger wouldn’t know that Miss Fowler habitually took King to the park, or that she was so nearsighted, and that King often hid from her.”

“We’ll have to check his room,” Sarah Wyndom said hesitantly. “Aunt Hitty took him out after I’d gone.”

Geoff followed her up the steel staircase. As expected, the child’s furniture was contemporary but, surprisingly, after the cold white rooms below, a thick blue rug covered the floor and splashes of color were everywhere.

“It was his brown hooded snow-suit,” she said, opening and closing bureau drawers. “Quite plain; and underneath, he’s wearing red slacks and a white sweater.”

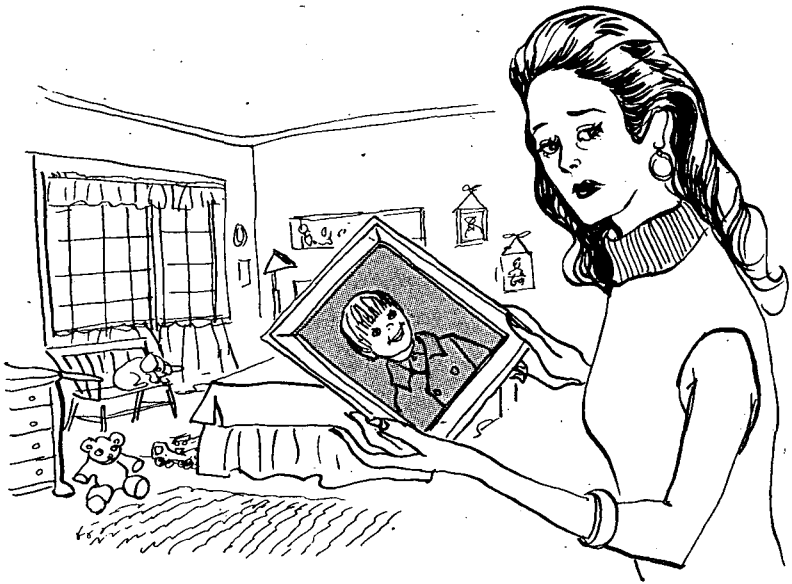
From an adjoining room, she brought a framed picture of the young boy. Philip King Wyndom looked like a nice child; he had his mother’s eyes and an open grin. Sarah’s fingers trembled slightly as she gave Geoff the picture.

Impulsively, he said; “Don’t worry, Mrs. Wyndom. We’ll get him back safely and we’ll find the man who took him.”

Her head swung up scornfully. “Will you indeed, Mr. Fleming? I was under the impression that criminal matters were outside your particular field of specialty.”

She turned on her heel and strode from the room.

Afternoon faded into winter dusk while they waited. Both servants, a cook and a maid, had the day off, so they ate sandwiches in the liv-



ingroom, huddled by the phone.

At last, Sarah rose and reached for the instrument. "I'll have to call the hospital, Philip."

"No," he said flatly.

"But Aunt Hitty may be dying."

"No," he repeated in the same tone.

Angrily, she rushed over to the closet and pulled out her sheepskin jacket. "If he calls," she said, pausing in the doorway, "page me at the hospital." The door slammed behind her.

"You think I'm callous," Wyndom observed as he freshened Geoff's drink.

"She seems very fond of her aunt," said Geoff neutrally.

"Hitty Fowler's not her aunt;

she's a family relic—second cousin eight times removed or something like that." Wyndom poured himself another drink. "I should have had my head examined before I ever let her near my son."

The telephone rang and Geoff dived for the kitchen. Wyndom let it ring three times, as they'd agreed, and they lifted the receivers simultaneously.

The voice was a hoarse, almost inaudible whisper. The words sounded curiously mechanical in their deliberate lack of inflection. "You will put the money in a small box wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. Your wife will go to the 77th Street IRT and take the first downtown local after 8:30. She

will get into the last car, sit next to a door and keep her eyes on the floor. If she is followed, you will never see the boy again."

"Wait!" Wyndom cried, but the kidnapper had hung up. It was 7:30.

"Call the hospital," Wyndom ordered. "I'll find a box."

By 7:50, the box was wrapped as specified. "Did you get my wife?" Wyndom asked.

"She left a half hour ago," Geoff said. "Miss Fowler's dead."

Angrily, Wyndom paced the room, tolling off the minutes. "What if she doesn't come back in time? Why did that woman go and die *now*? Hadn't she caused enough trouble?"

"If Mrs. Wyndom does come back in time, I'd advise you not to express that thought," Geoff said hotly.

Wyndom started to retort, but Sarah Wyndom quietly appeared in the doorway. She stood there examining him as if he were a stranger, through eyes which had not cried.

"You killed her," she said in a low voice. "As surely as if you'd shot her, knowing how precious King was to her, you killed her. I could have softened it for her—had the doctor here first—but you killed her."

"I'm sorry," he said desperately. "If we had time—but we haven't got

time, Sarah." Quickly, he outlined the kidnapper's instructions, but she continued to stand silently, appraising him with that same enigmatic expression.

Frustrated, he howled, "Don't you understand? Your son will be killed! There's only fourteen minutes left."

At that, she sighed and her shoulders drooped a moment; then she smiled at Geoff bitterly. "You've just heard an historic first, Mr. Fleming. Never before has he admitted that King's my son, too."

She whirled to Wyndom and in her emotion, her voice regained the accents of childhood. "You killed my oldest blood kin, Philip. You've pushed me across the brink of honor and made me hate you like I never wanted to. Yes! King is my son. If he were yours alone, I wouldn't lift a finger to save him!"

She took the box of money from Geoff. "Are you taking notes, Mr. Fleming? Documenting what an unstable mother I am?"

She tucked the box inside her bulky jacket and rushed from the apartment.

"You've got to let me follow her," Geoff pleaded as he heard the elevator descend. "Face the facts, man. We'll never catch him this way."

Indecision struggled across Wyndom's face as Geoff pulled on his

overcoat. "No! I can't risk it."

"And if they kill him after all?"

Anger replaced fear. "All right. Just don't let them see you."

When Geoff dashed from the building, it was 8:29 and he could see Sarah Wyndom starting down the subway steps two blocks away.

He tried to imitate someone hurrying only to get out of the icy wind which swept along the street. Fumbling for a subway token, he took the stairs two at a time, hearing a train roar into the station below. Desperately, he yanked off his glove to slip the token into a turnstile slot, missed, and the token spiraled across the platform.

He could only stand and watch as the doors closed behind Sarah Wyndom. At the last instant, as the train began to move, she turned and her startled eyes caught his; then she was borne away.

When she returned in little more than an hour, she was furious with Wyndom. "You swore you wouldn't let him do anything to frighten them off!"

Several minutes went by before she consented to talk. She had, "As Mr. Fleming knows," taken the train and sat down beside one of the doors with her eyes on the floor. After two stops, a man had sat down beside her but, as ordered, she had not looked up. All she'd seen were scuffed black shoes, gray slacks and

a well-worn, black tweed topcoat.

As they pulled into Bowling Green, he told her to hand him the box and remain on the train; then, just before the doors closed, he had jumped up and slipped out. She had looked then but, "His back was just like any other man's. I couldn't even see his hair because he wore a hat and had a blue scarf pulled up around his neck and ears."

The real waiting began in earnest then. After her initial anger, Sarah seemed drained of emotion and she ignored the two men except when a specific question was asked her. At 10:50, the telephone roused them to instant alertness.

"Don't forget, three rings!" Wyndom called as Geoff sped for the kitchen extension.

Eagerly, Sarah leaned forward, only to hear Wyndom say brusquely, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Wyndom can't talk to you now. I'll have her call you first thing in the morning."

He banged down the receiver. "Damn hospital, wanting to make arrangements for—" He broke off as he saw his wife's face.

In an effort to ease the tension, Geoff paused in the doorway. "Coffee, anyone? It's my one culinary talent."

It fell flat and the waiting continued.

By midnight, Geoff had almost

dozed off when Sarah stood up wearily. "I'm going to take a shower and change. I can hear the phone in my room."

"Don't pick it up," Wyndom warned. "If he hears the click, he might think we're taping his voice."

She didn't answer, just kept walking up the stairs, across the landing, into her room. The door closed quietly and in a few minutes they heard the muffled sound of running water.

Inconsequentially, Wyndom said, "I keep thinking I'll get the upstairs soundproofed, but—" He shrugged.

Geoff stretched and had started into the kitchen for more coffee when the phone rang. Once, twice—it took all his discipline not to grab the receiver too quickly—three times.

Immediately they heard that familiar lifeless whisper. "I warned you not to have her followed. Too bad you didn't listen."

Slowly, Geoff returned to the livingroom. He heard a door bang and saw Sarah Wyndom hurry down the stairs, knotting the sash of her red wool robe as she came. Her long dark hair was tied back with a ribbon and her face was still damp from the shower.

"Was it him? What did he say? Where's King?" Neither man answered, but she read it in their faces and sank down upon the cold steel

staircase and buried her face in the lap of her robe.

"They won't get away with it!" Wyndom snarled. "They won't hurt *my* son and get away free!" He snatched up the telephone and dialed for the police with a violence that almost ripped the dial plate from the phone.

On the staircase, Sarah lifted her head and stared at him with disbelief. "*Your* son again," she whispered.

Slowly, deliberately, she let her eyes encompass the whole room. "Your son. Your home. Your money. How dare anyone meddle with *your* possessions! I was right. That's all King is to you—the most valuable thing you own, but a possession all the same and nothing more. Admit it!"

The iron was back in her spine as she stood. The tears for her son and her aunt were gone and her chin jutted defiantly. "My husband won't need you anymore, Mr. Fleming. I'll go back to King's Post now, Philip. There's nothing here of mine to fight for any longer."

Two days later, after the FBI and police had gotten every possible fact and supposition from her, Sarah King Wyndom had flown down alone to Carolina with her aunt's body for a simple funeral.

After four weeks, an FBI agent admitted, unofficially, that they

were at a dead end. Every lead had proved false; there was no trace of the man in the blue scarf; and King's body had not been found.

With that, Sarah had flown to Mexico; obtained an uncontested divorce, refused all alimony and buried herself in King's Post. Six months later, Philip Wyndom possessed a bride.

In the years that followed, the new, trendy Mrs. Wyndom found time to produce three sons; a famous pop artist stenciled baby-food labels all over the walls and ceiling of the renovated nursery; and *The Times* had included a picture of it in one of their supplements on home furnishings.

Geoff supposed Philip Wyndom was happy.

The next afternoon, Geoff drove into King's Post, a pretty little town named for one of Sarah Wyndom's ancestors. The postmistress knew her—"Sarah Gilchrist, she is now,"—but was vague about directions to the old King place. The rural mail carrier was much more explicit, and Geoff soon found himself turning into a dirt lane.

The house at the end of the lane was an unpretentious, one-story farmhouse which sprawled comfortably beneath arching pecan trees. Lilacs and spring bulbs lined a well-worn path which led, with

country directness, to a side entrance of the kitchen.

As Geoff tapped at the screen door, he could see a baby in a high chair, waving a cookie in welcome.

"Who is it?" Sarah called cheerfully, rounding the door. Her waifish air of vulnerability had been replaced by a look of serenity, but otherwise she didn't seem to have changed at all as she paused behind the screen in green shorts and a flowered shirt, her black hair tied back with a ribbon.

"Hello, Mrs. Gilchrist," said Geoff.

"If you're selling something, I can't talk now." She grinned. "I'm in the middle of freezing peas . . ." Her words trailed off as she recognized him.

"Mr. Fleming!" she whispered; and fear touched her eyes. "Did Philip send you?"

"No, no," he assured her quickly, and explained how he'd made the side trip impulsively on his way back to New York from Atlanta. "You could call me nosy." He smiled, trying to erase the apprehension in her eyes. "From the papers, I know that Mr. Wyndom got what he said he wanted; but I've wondered about you. I didn't have a chance back then to tell you that I was in your corner. Sorry to have bothered you, but seeing the baby gives me my answer, I guess."

Geoff started down the steps to his car, but she called to him. As he turned, she held the screen door open.

"As long as you're in the neighborhood, how about some coffee?" Her smile said that she wanted to trust him.

The kitchen was old-fashioned in its proportions but modern in appliances. Its riotous colors and felicitous clutter of family life made it completely different from the cold, white opulence in which she'd once lived.

"So you're a farmer now," Geoff said awkwardly when coffee was poured and they were both seated at the kitchen table. She continued to shell peas, deftly stripping the pods.

"Yes, but you don't really want to talk about farming, do you?" she asked shrewdly, as her eyes followed his.

He had just spotted, carelessly flung there behind the door, the scuffed sneakers and worn baseball glove that could belong only to an adolescent boy, and he felt a tingle along his spine as he realized their significance.

"You did it!" he exclaimed. "I knew there was something wrong about the ransom!"

"The ransom?"

"It was too low," he explained. "Why ask only \$15,000 from a mil-

lionaire? Every time I thought of that, a parallel memory reminded me how you balked at alimony and wouldn't take a penny from him."

"I sent the money back before Gil and I were married two years ago," she said quietly. "I didn't know about statutes of limitation or if what I'd done was a real crime, and I wanted the whole thing settled once and for all before I married Gil."

"But if Wyndom knows, why were you afraid he sent me?"

"The check came back from my bank endorsed in his handwriting, but he never wrote or called or issued a warrant for my arrest or anything. Philip's quite capable of waiting until I feel safe before he takes his revenge. I thought you might be it."

"But who helped you? The FBI went over all your servants and everyone at the settlement house with a microscope."

"I don't suppose it would hurt to tell you," she said slowly, as she put the peas aside, lifted the baby from his high chair and set him on the floor.

"Philip and I'd been deadlocked over the divorce and King's custody. We'd never had a good marriage and, as King grew older, things got worse. Our values were so different. You saw how King had treated Aunt Hitty? Philip liked

that, called it proof of necessary ruthlessness. He wanted total control of King's life and he had money and power on his side. It was just a matter of time. Didn't he hire you to blacken my character?"

"He tried," Geoff admitted. "I didn't have a chance to tell him to go take a flying leap."

"I was desperate," she continued. "Then, the day before I staged the kidnapping, a boy from King's Post came into the settlement house. He was in a scrape with the police, more out of sheer ignorance than criminality, and he needed money to run. He swore if he could get back home, he'd go back to farming and stay out of trouble. It seemed like my only way out.

"We met at the park the next day and, after he got King away from Aunt Hitty, I put them in a cab for Penn Station, where they took a train south. King thought it a great adventure and the boy left him with a cousin of mine near here."

"But if he'd already left the city, who made the phone calls?"

"I did. One from the hospital, the rest from the extension in my bedroom. The phones were like a party line; if you dial a code and hang up the receiver, all the phones on the line start ringing. You and Philip

made it easier by waiting for three rings; then we all picked up the receiver at the same time."

"I suppose you hid the money in a subway locker and made up that story about the man?"

"Yes to the man; no to the locker." She took an empty pea pod from the baby. "The box containing the money was wrapped and while I was going down in the elevator, I stuck on a mailing label and some stamps I had in my pocket. The package was in a mailbox before I got to the subway and I was terrified that you might have seen me when you followed. I thought I'd made a dreadful mistake."

"No, your husband, the law and I—we jumped through all the right hoops," Geoff said, putting down his empty cup. "Your performance was flawless."

"Not flawless," she said quietly, her dark eyes smoky with pain as they rested on her second child; and Geoff knew then that she still weighed the cost, and would as long as she lived, of an old woman's death against a child's unmaimed life.

Perhaps, Geoff thought as he drove northward on I-95 an hour later, there are some things which were never meant to be balanced.

The odds seem to favor further payment for a job well done.



HOOKER WAS TRYING to decide whether to bet his bobtailed straight into a possible flush when Gonzales, the lookout, slipped into the room.

"Señor Hooker, there is a big gringo outside who wants to see you. I told him you were not here, but I think he knows better."

Hooker took the thin *cigarro* out of his mouth. "How big is this gringo?"

Gonzales spread his hands wide. "Like a horse. Like two horses."

"In that case I'd better go and see what he wants." Hooker folded his hand and got up from the table. He

walked through a short passageway into a dim *cantina* that was not part of any official guided tour of San Salvador. At the bar stood a scowling man who was nearly as big as Gonzales' description. His plaid jacket could have enclosed two ordinary men, but it stretched tight across the massive shoulders.

"Are you John Hooker?" the big man demanded.

"That's right. Who are you?"

"My name's Kagle."

"Should that mean something to me?"

"No, but Dominic Romo should."

Hooker knew the name. Nick

Romo was a near legendary figure who owned plush gambling casinos all over the world and was a playmate of the jet set.

"I've heard of Romo," Hooker said. "What about it?"

"Mr. Romo wants to see you."

by Gary
Brandner

"I'm pretty busy right now, tell him to come around to my place tomorrow. Not too early."

Kagle wrinkled his brow in concentration. "You don't get the picture. Mr. Romo wants to see you now."

Before Hooker could react, Kagle's huge hands shot out and clamped the gambler's arms at the elbows. Hooker stood six feet one, and weighed a solid 190, but Kagle lifted him several inches off the floor with no apparent effort.

"Mr. Romo said to bring you peacefully," Kagle said, "but I can bend you a little bit if I have to."

"You've made your point," Hooker said. "Let me off at the ground floor and we'll go see your boss."

The taxi driver waiting for them

outside was greatly relieved to escape from the dark, unpatrolled section of San Salvador into the smartly modern part of the city where they pulled up in front of the new Hotel Continental.

"I don't suppose you'd give me a hint about what's going on," Hooker said as they rode up in the carpeted elevator.

"You already know as much as I do," Kagle growled.

They got out at the ninth floor and Kagle led the way to a suite at the end of the hall. In the livingroom a man in his middle thirties lounged on a broad couch; purple-tinted sunglasses concealed his eyes. At the other end of the room an auburn-haired girl leaned casually against a leather-covered bar. A U.S. magazine lay open in front of her.

"I'm Dominic Romo," the man said. "What is your drink, Mr. Hooker?"

"Brandy," said Hooker, spotting a bottle on the bar.

To the girl Romo said, "Lacey, will you pour?"

She splashed the brandy into two balloon glasses and carried them over to the men. Her rust-colored dress was an expensive knit that moved with her body. On her wrist jangled a cheap bracelet of silver coins that was out of harmony with the rest of her.

Following Hooker's glance at the bracelet, Romo said, "Lacey picked that out on her own. As you can see, her taste is not always the best. She bought that trinket this morning in your local slum district—the *barrio bajo*, I believe it's called."

"It's really an amusing neighborhood," the girl said in a finishing-school voice.

"Sure, it's a laugh a minute," Hooker said.

Romo moved in smoothly. "My dear, this is John Hooker . . . Lacey McLean."

"Hello," Hooker said.

The girl nodded and returned her attention to the magazine.

"I'll have to ask you to excuse us, Lacey," Romo said. "Mr. Hooker and I have business to discuss."

With a yawn the girl tossed the magazine aside and left the room.

"You too, Kagle," Romo said.

For a moment the big man frowned in confusion and seemed about to say something, but he changed his mind and followed Lacey out the door.

Romo got up and walked over to stand face to face with Hooker. He pulled off the tinted shades and looked the gambler over.

"We're about the same age," he said. "Your size is all right. You've got an inch in height and maybe ten pounds on me, but that's close enough. The brown hair matches

and I like the way you carry yourself. Yes, I think you'll do."

"I'm so glad you approve," Hooker said. "What is it that you think I'll do?"

"Sit down, Hooker, I have a proposition for you."

Hooker ignored the soft chair Romo offered and dragged a stool over from the bar.

"I presume you know who I am," Romo said.

"I've heard of you. I didn't think San Salvador was your style."

"I don't expect to be here long. Tell me, have you also heard of Victor Sarrazin?"

"He owns a gambling casino, doesn't he, on a small island in the Cayman group?"

"That's the man. I trust you don't know him personally."

"No."

"Good. Mr. Sarrazin has gone rather heavily into debt in the past few years. Recently I bought up his IOUs from the men he borrowed from. Tomorrow I am to travel to Sarrazin's island to present these notes for payment. Since he does not have the money, I will take the title to his casino in return for the outstanding IOUs. This has all been arranged, and all that remains is the paper work."

"I imagine you're getting to my part in this," Hooker said.

"What I want you to do is take

my place. You will get Sarrazin's signature on the title transfer, and you will return his IOUs. For this I will pay you \$5,000."

"As simple as that."

"Well, not quite that simple," Romo smiled. "I have reason to believe that Sarrazin will try to kill me before the transfer is made."

Romo paused, waiting for Hooker to react, then hurried on when the gambler's face showed nothing. "There has already been one attempt on my life. Last night my yacht was anchored off Acajutla. I was standing near the bow rail when suddenly the boat's electrical power went off. In the dark somebody pushed me from behind and I fell over the side. I am not a swimmer, and it was lucky that members of my crew were able to find me in the water and pull me out."

"Are you telling me Sarrazin slipped on board your yacht and pushed you into the drink?"

"Of course not," Romo said impatiently. "But the sailor who did the job was surely hired by Sarrazin. The only way he can keep from losing his casino tomorrow is to kill me."

"Have you thought of telling the authorities?"

"It would be a waste of time. I have no actual proof that Sarrazin is behind it."

"What about the sailor? Won't he talk?"

"Unfortunately, he was missing by the time things quieted down and someone thought to look for him."

"If it was dark, how can you be sure it was the sailor who pushed you?"

"The fact that he ran away would be enough, but Kagle remembered seeing him fooling around the power panel in the cabin a few minutes before the lights went out."

"Let me see if I understand this. You want me to pretend that I'm you, so that if Sarrazin tries to kill you, he gets me instead."

"Essentially, yes. If Sarrazin makes his move before the papers are signed, I will have my proof. If not, there's no harm done."

"And for this you will pay me \$5,000."

"Yes."

"Good night, Romo."

As Hooker started for the door Romo held up a hand to stop him. "Just a moment. It was not by chance that I selected you for the job, Hooker. Not only do you bear a resemblance to me, but I hear you can take care of yourself in critical situations."

"Thanks, but I don't hire out as a target for \$5,000."

"I have also looked into your

background," Romo went on. "Because of some unpleasantness with a boatload of guns six years ago, you cannot return to the United States without facing arrest."

"That's no secret."

"You are permitted to stay in San Salvador through your rather questionable association with a, Señor Delgado of the *policia*. I have friends in the government who could persuade Delgado to sign your extradition papers. You understand I would be most reluctant to take this step."

"I'll bet. Anyway, what makes you think I could con Sarrazin into thinking I'm Nick Romo?"

"That should be no problem. Sarrazin has never met me, and I have never been near his casino. He could not know me from photographs since only two have been published, neither of which was recognizable."

"I remember one of them about a year ago," Hooker said. "It was a blurry picture of you after a boating accident off La Paz. What was the other one?"

"It was at some tiresome congressional investigation. The photographers caught me outside the hearing room, but my head was turned away from the camera."

"All right," Hooker said, "I guess I'm dealt in. What's the schedule?"

"I'll pick you up at noon tomorrow.

You, Kagle and Lacey will take a plane out of Ilopango Airport for Grand Cayman Island."

"Kagle and the girl are going with me?"

"Dominic Romo would not travel alone." Romo pursed his lips and eyed Hooker's khakis. "I suppose you'll have to wear one of my suits. It won't be a perfect fit . . ."

"Believe it or not, I *have* a suit."

"Good. Please be ready at noon."

Shortly before twelve the next day Hooker studied himself in the mirror in his one-room apartment. Since his exile from the States he had worn a suit and tie not more than a dozen times. At this rate, he thought, his gray suit would last a lifetime.

From a drawer he took a .38 and slipped it into a shoulder holster. As he buttoned his jacket there was a thumping at the door.

Kagle completely filled the door-frame. He grunted at Hooker and led the way down and out of the building to a hired car. The big man got in front with the driver and Hooker slid into the back seat next to Romo. Lacey McLean, wearing a short brown dress, sat on the other side.

As the car tooted through the narrow streets, Hooker felt the atmosphere crackle with hostility. Kagle's shoulder muscles were

bunched under the tight sport coat. Lacey kept her eyes straight ahead, her mouth set in a grim line.

"What's everybody so happy about?" Hooker asked.

Romo said, "I have just told Lacey and Kagle that you will be traveling with them in my place. Their feelings are hurt because I didn't confide in them sooner."

"There's no need to treat us like children," Lacey said.

"No offense, my dear. I just felt that our little masquerade had a better chance to succeed if as few people as possible knew about it beforehand." Leaning toward the front seat Romo added, "Come now, Kagle, you're not going to sulk, are you? There's a good boy."

A vein pulsed in the side of Kagle's neck, but the big man said nothing. The ride to Ilopango Airport was completed in chilly silence.

When they arrived, a sturdy old twin Beech was warmed up and waiting at the head of the runway. The pilot, a cheerful man named Castillo, ran a one-plane charter operation with the grandiose title of Trans-Caribbean Airways.

As the others boarded the plane, Romo slipped several large bills from a money clip and handed them to Hooker, along with a slim white envelope.

"This money will cover your ex-

penses. In the envelope is the transfer paper turning the casino over to me. When I get it back with Sarrazin's signature, you get your \$5,000."

"What about his IOUs?" Hooker asked.

"Kagle is carrying those." Romo put on a silky smile. "You're a gambler, Hooker, you should understand about hedging one's bets."

Hooker took the cash and the envelope without comment and stepped up into the cabin. There were three single seats on either side of the narrow aisle. Hooker sat in the rear across from Lacey, while Kagle squeezed into a seat up front.

Castillo climbed aboard last and walked forward to the pilot's compartment, smiling reassuringly at his passengers. After a smooth takeoff the Beech circled and took a heading northeast toward the lush mountains of Honduras.

Hooker turned to the girl, who seemed intent on the cloud formations outside. "Look, if I'm supposed to be your boyfriend on this trip, don't you think we ought to practice talking to each other?"

Lacey regarded him coolly. "What would you like to talk about?"

"You and me, for one thing. How well do we know each other?"

A faint color came to Lacey's cheeks as she answered. "I met

Nick Romo a month ago in Aca-pulco."

"Nice place."

"It used to be," she said airily, "before it was discovered by insurance salesmen from Des Moines and people like that. None of the old crowd goes there anymore."

"What a shame," Hooker said. "Once you let those middle-class people in, there goes the neighborhood."

The girl switched a cold smile on and off and went back to staring out the window. The plane crossed the Honduras shoreline at La Ceiba and droned over the Islas de la Bahía with nothing ahead but the sparkling Caribbean. After a while Lacey turned back to Hooker.

"You're a gambler, I understand."

"Officially I'm a tourist guide," Hooker said, "but it's true that my tours often lead to a poker game."

"What makes you take a job like this one? You must know what Romo is setting you up for."

"I laugh at danger," Hooker growled, but something in the girl's eyes made him turn serious. "I'm doing it for \$5,000—and because if I don't do it, Romo can get me arrested."

"That sounds like Romo," Lacey said. "Watch yourself, Hooker." Then her eyes turned mocking. "And don't spend your \$5,000 all in

one place," she said facetiously.

As the girl returned her attention to the seascape below, Kagle twisted in his cramped seat and said to Hooker, "You wouldn't have a drink on you, would you?"

"Sorry," Hooker said.

"Damn." The big man's face had turned oyster gray. "If there's one thing I hate it's flying. How much longer do you figure it'll be?"

The smiling brown face of Castillo appeared in the open doorway to the cockpit. "We land at Grand Cayman Island in three hours. If the señores would like a little drink . . ." He produced a pint of Scotch which Kagle instantly purchased for ten dollars.

The big man took a long swallow, wiped his mouth, and sighed gratefully. "You want one?" he said to Hooker.

"Thanks." Hooker drank from the bottle and passed it back. "How long have you had this job, Kagle?"

"Working for Romo? About five years now." Kagle's color improved as he took another pull at the bottle.

"And you're what—a body-guard?"

"Bodyguard, messenger boy, flunky . . . you name it."

"You don't sound too happy about it."

"Romo has a way of treating a guy like a dumb idiot. I know I'm

not the smartest in the world, but at least I know my job." Kagle belted the Scotch and handed it to Hooker. "Romo even blames me for letting him get pushed off his boat. I guess he expects me to see in the dark."

"Why do you stay with him?" Hooker asked.

Kagle gave a snort of laughter. "Because he pays better than what I was doing before—busting chains in a sideshow."

"I guess he can afford it," Hooker said. "That layout you people have in the Continental doesn't rent for peanuts."

Lacey McLean's head snapped around from the window. "Not that I care what you think, gambler, but I stay at the El Mundo."

"Sorry." Hooker gave the girl a wondering look.

Kagle reached a hand back. "Lemme have the jug. We're gonna land, and that's the part I hate most."

Kagle finished the pint and the Beech nosed into a steep glide toward an airstrip along the western shore of Grand Cayman. The plane touched down and bounced several times before coming to a stop. The pilot walked back to open the door and set out the portable steps for his passengers.

A dozen or so private planes were parked along the sides of the

landing strip. The pilots fussed around them like handlers at a dog show. At one end of the strip was a squat building of corrugated iron with a wind sock flying from a pole on the roof. Hooker and the others went inside and identified themselves to a man who seemed to be in charge.

"Ah yes, Mr. Romo," the man said, "the driver from your hotel was here, but he had to go back to Georgetown. He left the jeep for you." The man gestured through the open door at a garish pink vehicle with Victoria Hotel lettered on the side. "She's gassed up and ready to go."

Kagle climbed in front and took the wheel without being asked. Hooker and Lacey got in the back. Their pilot declined a ride into the capital, saying he would stay with his plane. Kagle started the engine and they jounced off on the narrow road leading away from the airstrip.

The road followed the sea cliffs on their right while tropical greenery crowded in from the left. Kagle drove with professional competence while Lacey stared straight ahead, a tight frown on her face.

"Don't you like the scenery?" Hooker said.

Before the girl could reply, a series of flat reports like firecrackers came from up ahead where the road bent inland. Kagle bellowed a

warning and Hooker caught a glimpse of a man standing at the roadside with a pistol leveled at them. The jeep slammed to a stop and Hooker dragged the girl down behind the front seats. By the time he was up again with the .38 in his fist, Kagle was running in the road and his broad back was between Hooker and the gunman.

Hooker vaulted from the jeep

and followed as the two running men disappeared behind a boulder on the cliff side of the road. From up ahead came a high-pitched wail of terror that faded, then ended abruptly. Hooker rounded the boulder to find Kagle staring down a cliff that dropped forty feet to a jumble of rocks on the shoreline. A figure lay crumpled at the bottom. In Kagle's hand was a blue-black



.45, shimmering in the sunlight.

"Did you shoot him?" Hooker asked.

"I didn't get a chance. He ran right over the edge here like he thought he could walk on air."

"Let's go," Hooker said.

Kagle took a last look at the body, then followed Hooker back to the jeep, where Lacey was waiting nervously.

When they were under way again Lacey said, "Do you have any idea who he was?"

Hooker shook his head. "He was a poor excuse for an assassin."

Lacey sat pensively for the rest of the drive. As they approached the colorful buildings of Georgetown she touched Hooker's arm.

"Back there, when the shooting started, your first move was to protect me. That was . . . Well, thanks," she finished self-consciously.

Hooker looked down at the girl as they pulled to a stop at the Victoria Hotel. "Don't mention it," he said.

The moon rested round and fat on the water as Hooker, Kagle and Lacey boarded a launch that evening for Sarrazin's island. The only other passengers were a middle-aged couple straying from their prepackaged tour of the Caribbean. Most of the serious gamblers had

gone over earlier in the evening.

Hooker and Lacey stood in the rear of the boat watching the phosphorescent wake while Kagle hovered behind the helmsman.

"I want to tell you something, Hooker," Lacey said.

"Go ahead."

"I'm not really one of the smart-talking Beautiful People."

"Is that so?"

"You'll never guess where I was born."

"Not Zurich?"

"Muncie, Indiana. My parents still live there. I was a cheerleader in high school. I won a couple of beauty contests and, like all the others, I went to Hollywood. I worked at all kinds of jobs there and took acting lessons while waiting to be discovered. At the end of three years I was still waiting. Then I met a nice boy who was working on his master's degree in oceanography. When he asked me to marry him I jumped at the chance. I was fed up with Hollywood, and all I wanted to do was spend the rest of my life as a wife."

When the girl fell silent Hooker asked softly, "What happened?"

"A year ago, just before we were going to be married, the boy died. A big part of me died with him."

"Why tell me, Lacey?"

"I just don't want you to think too badly of me, that's all. Don't ask

me why I care. I don't really know."

"I'm in no position to make judgments," Hooker said, "but anybody who was a cheerleader in Muncie, Indiana can't be all bad."

Lacey smiled up at the tall gambler. "You know, Hooker, I could like you a lot. It's too bad we didn't meet somewhere else." She gave his hand a squeeze and walked forward to watch as the launch slid in alongside Sarrazin's dock.

At the top of a flight of wooden steps the casino glittered invitingly with colored lights. Behind the casino could be seen several outbuildings and a cozy-looking cottage. The launch passengers climbed the steps to the casino, where a man in a white doorman's uniform admitted them.

They entered a maroon-carpeted foyer with two wide steps leading down to the casino proper. Craps, roulette, and blackjack were getting moderate play from the customers.

"I want to see Victor Sarrazin," Hooker told the doorman. "Tell him Dominic Romo is here."

"Yes, sir." The doorman hurried through the casino and under an archway to the bar. Hooker followed him, with Lacey and Kagle in his wake. The doorman went out through a door at the far end of the bar, and was back almost immediately.

"Mr. Sarrazin will be right out, sir. Please have a drink while you wait."

Hooker chose a table where he could see into the casino and watch the back door at the same time. He ordered a brandy and soda. Kagle had straight bourbon and Lacey wanted only a cup of coffee. Shortly after a waiter brought their order, an oily little man with silver hair and apologetic eyes came through the rear door and walked gingerly toward their table.

"Mr. Romo? I'm Victor Sarrazin."

"Sit down," Hooker said.

Sarrazin perched on the edge of a chair between Hooker and Lacey. "I—I suppose you will want to look the place over."

"No need for that. I just want to get the paper signed."

"Yes, of course." Sarrazin patted his hair with an unsteady hand. "Would there be any point in asking for an extension?"

"No," Hooker said.

Sarrazin gazed around the bar and out into the gambling room. "This is all I have, you know—the casino and my little cottage out in back. When you take this I'll have nothing left."

"You'll have your IOUs back." Hooker had never liked losers who cried. "Let's get on with it."

The smaller man searched

Hooker's face for a moment, then his gaze slipped away. "All right," he said.

Hooker didn't see the blonde until she suddenly loomed over their table. She was tall with fine cheekbones and a straight, patrician nose.

"Won't you introduce me to your friends, Victor?" she said. A faint accent tinged her speech.

Sarrazin looked from the woman to Hooker in momentary confusion, then he recovered. "Of course. This is Mr. Dominic Romo and his associates, er . . ."

"Miss McLean and Mr. Kagle," Hooker supplied.

"May I present Irina Van Zandt," Sarrazin said.

"I have heard much about you, Mr. Romo. Perhaps I will see you later in the casino."

"Perhaps," Hooker said.

Irina Van Zandt drifted away and Sarrazin cleared his throat nervously. "If you'll give me a few minutes to clean up some odds and ends, we can get the paper work out of the way," he said, and bowed himself out the back door.

Hooker saw that Kagle had finished his drink and was peering hungrily into the casino.

"Go ahead and try the tables if you want to," he said.

"Jeez, I'd like to. I feel lucky tonight. You sure you don't mind?"

"I'm sure. I want to check the ac-

tion here anyway," Hooker told him.

While Kagle bought chips at the cashier's cage, Hooker peered around the room for Irina Van Zandt, but the tall blonde was not in sight.

"Come on, Lacey," Hooker said as Kagle headed for a crap table, "let's go cheer for our team."

Kagle muscled in next to the shooter and took the dice when the man sevens out. He threw two naturals, then made his point, a ten, the hard way. "I knew I was lucky tonight," he said, and rattled the dice eagerly in his ham hand.

"Señor Romo." The whispery voice was close behind Hooker's ear. "Will you come to Señor Sarrazin's office?"

Hooker turned and looked into the pockmarked face of a young man in an oversized tan suit.

"Just a minute." Hooker laid a hand on Kagle's shoulder and the big man paused with the dice held aloft in his fist. "Give me Sarrazin's IOUs and I'll go get the business out of the way."

Kagle reached inside his coat for a thick yellow envelope. "Don't you want me to come with you?"

"No, you go ahead and break the bank." With a wink at Lacey, Hooker took the envelope and followed the pockmarked youth back past the bar and through the door in the rear. They walked down a

dim hallway and into an office where Victor Sarrazin sat behind a desk. Hooker sensed a change in Sarrazin's attitude. His eyes no longer apologized.

"Thanks for waiting, Nick. You don't mind if I call you Nick? Did you bring the IOUs?"

"I brought them." Hooker's nerves pulled taut as he withdrew the transfer paper from his pocket. "As soon as you sign this I'll give them to you."

Sarrazin spread the sheet on his desk and half turned toward a door behind him. "Come in, my dear," he called.

The door opened and Irina Van Zandt glided into the room. She regarded Hooker with icy amusement.

"Tell our friend here what you told me," Sarrazin said.

Irina gazed steadily at Hooker's face. "I have never seen this man before."

"What of it?" Hooker said, keeping his voice level.

"I have known Nick Romo very, *very* intimately. But I don't know you."

Hooker's hand moved a fraction of an inch toward his shoulder.

"Don't try it," Sarrazin said. "You're covered."

Slowly Hooker turned his head and saw the youth in the tan suit pointing a heavy automatic at him.

"Get his gun, Chico," Sarrazin said. "You'll find it under his left arm." When Chico had lifted the .38, Sarrazin went on, "Now let's have my IOUs."

Hooker tossed the yellow envelope on the desk and watched the oily little man rip it open and carefully check the contents. "You're buying a lot of trouble, Sarrazin."

"From Romo? I don't think so. Men like Nick and me have our own rules. He won't blame me, he'll blame the guy who sold him out."

"What do you mean?"

"When your friends out front finally come looking for you I'll show them the IOUs and tell them you made a deal on your own that included a boat to get away in. They'll go after you, but I don't think they'll ever catch up."

Hooker caught the flicker of Sarrazin's eyes, but had no time to react before Chico's pistol slammed into the side of his head. The room exploded in a red flash of pain, then went mercifully to black.

Something wet and cold and rough vibrated against Hooker's face. He wanted to groan, but with an effort kept still. He eased his eyes open to slits, grinding his teeth against the pain that hammered at his head. He was lying in an open boat, his feet toward the bow. Almost touching his face were a pair

of square-toed oxfords with legs growing up from them into tan suit pants. An outboard motor snarled somewhere behind the legs.

While Hooker was trying to think his way through the pain, the pitch of the outboard changed and the boat went dead in the water. One of the oxfords prodded Hooker's head and he choked back a yell of pain. Chico muttered something in Spanish and went to one knee to get his hands under Hooker's arms. He struggled to pull the limp form up from the bottom of the boat.

When he had been hauled to approximately a sitting position, Hooker braced a foot on the wooden seat ahead of him, snapped his hands up and locked them behind Chico's head, then lunged forward. Chico gave a hoarse cry as his feet left the deck and he sailed over Hooker's shoulder to land heavily across the seat. While Chico fought to get his breath back, Hooker took both guns from his pocket, kept the .38, and tossed the automatic into the water.

Hooker braced himself on the rear seat and breathed deeply of the sea air to ease the throbbing of his head. He stared down coldly as Chico struggled to sit up.

"How are you at swimming, Chico?"

"*Muy malo*, señor. I swim very

bad. No distance at all, señor."

"Then you'd better improve. Over you go. *Vaya!*"

"No, señor, *por favor!* I will drown!"

Hooker stiff-armed him in the breastbone and Chico went over backwards into the warm Caribbean. When he surfaced he grabbed the side of the boat with one hand but let go fast when Hooker stamped on his fingers.

The gambler slammed the outboard's shift lever and the boat leaped forward. He steered around in a tight circle and headed back toward Sarrazin's island where only a few lights twinkled now. He caught one last glimpse of Chico stroking manfully toward shore.

Bypassing the main dock, Hooker brought the boat to a small landing at the foot of a path leading to the cottage behind the casino. He tied it there next to a sleek cabin cruiser as streaks of dawn began to show in the east. He crossed the narrow strip of beach and climbed silently to the cottage. The front door swung open at his touch.

Inside, Hooker eased through the livingroom to a closed door on the far side. He pushed it open and found the light switch, snapping it on as he drew the .38.

Irina Van Zandt flew out of the bed as though she were wired to the switch. She snatched up the quilted

spread and held it before her like a shield. Sarrazin sat up blinking, then pushed himself back against the headboard as if he wanted to go through the wall.

Ignoring the woman, Hooker leveled the gun at Sarrazin. "Get out of there. Move!"

Sarrazin obeyed, wide-awake and frightened.

"Where's the transfer paper?"

"It—it's in my coat pocket."

Hooker felt through the tux jacket draped over a chair and found the paper. He tossed it onto a glass-topped dressing table along with a pen.

"Sign it."

As Sarrazin smoothed out the paper, one of his hands stole toward a drawer. He had his fingers inside when Hooker fired. The force of the slug knocked Sarrazin into a sitting position. He stared at the hole in his forearm.

"You shot me," he accused. "I'm bleeding."

"And I've got a headache," Hooker said. He strode to the dresser and pulled a pistol from the drawer. "Get up and sign the paper. I hope you're not left-handed."

Sarrazin stood up shakily and scratched his signature at the bottom of the transfer paper, then cowered back against the wall. "Please don't kill me."

Hooker examined the signature

and put the paper away. "That cruiser down below, is it fueled up?"

"Y-yes."

"I'm borrowing it as far as Grand Cayman. I hope you're smart enough not to send anybody after me."

"Wait a minute." It was Irina Van Zandt, who had recovered enough to drape the bedspread artfully around her body. "Could you take a passenger?"

Hooker ran his eyes over her briefly. "No, thanks, lady. You're bad luck."

It took less than forty minutes for the powerful cruiser to reach the dock at Grand Cayman Island. Hooker taxied to the airstrip where, as he expected, the twin Beech was gone. He spent most of Romo's expense money to hire a young Brazilian pilot to fly him out.

Back in San Salvador, Hooker went first to his apartment where he took a shower and changed clothes. He ate a breakfast of sausage and eggs across the street, then hailed a taxi and rode to the El Mundo Hotel.

Thirty minutes later the cab pulled up in front of the Continental. Hooker told the driver to wait, then went inside and took the elevator to Romo's floor.

Kagle opened the door, then stepped back wide-eyed to let

Hooker pass. Dominic Romo sat motionless at a small desk on the other side of the room. Hooker walked over and laid the signed transfer paper in front of him.

"This is quite a surprise," Romo said. He shot a hard look at Kagle. "The story I got was that you made a deal with Sarrazin."

"It's not Kagle's fault. Sarrazin set it up to look that way."

"What happened?"

"I got careless and one of his boys clubbed me from behind. We went for a boat ride, but I came back before I was supposed to."

"Is that what Sarrazin had planned for me?" Romo asked.

"No. He doesn't have the nerve to go up against you."

"What about the sailor who pushed me off the yacht?"

"Sarrazin had nothing to do with it. The sailor must have been a nut of some kind. A revolutionary, maybe."

Romo was unconvinced. "And the man who shot at you on Grand Cayman?"

"Probably a junkie after money to buy dope."

"Are you asking me to believe those were two random and unrelated attacks?"

"I don't care what you believe. I'm telling you that you have nothing to fear from Sarrazin."

Romo studied the gambler's face.

"All right, Hooker, I'll take your word for that, but I think I'll stay out of dark alleys for a while."

"Good idea. Now, I think you owe me some money."

"Of course." Romo left the room for a moment and returned with a black attaché case. He unlocked it and took out one of the neat green bundles inside. Hooker glanced up to see an odd expression cross Kagle's face. The big man turned away when he saw Hooker watching him.

"Perhaps we can do business again sometime," Romo said.

The tall gambler paused on his way out. "I don't think so," he said, and closed the door firmly behind him.

Downstairs, Hooker told the taxi driver to go to the airport, then leaned back in the seat next to Lacey McLean.

"How did it go?" the girl asked.

"I don't think Romo bought my version, but by the time he figures things out you'll be long gone."

"You knew all along that Sarrazin wasn't behind it, didn't you?"

"I had my doubts. That story about the sailor didn't hold up. If he threw the power switch in the cabin it would be quite a trick for him to run up on deck, find Romo in the dark, and shove him overboard. No, Romo had to be pushed

by somebody who was standing close to him when the lights went out."

"I'm glad the sailor got away," Lacey said. "He thought that turning out the lights was part of a practical joke I was playing on Romo."

"And a pro like Sarrazin wouldn't have hired that freak on Grand Cayman for a rubout. Where did you find him? On your shopping trip into the *barrio bajo*?"

"Yes. I went looking for him, or someone like him. I told him what Romo looked like and put him on a plane to Grand Cayman. I gave him the gun and told him to use it the first chance he got. I didn't know what to do when you took Romo's place."

"You really hated the man, didn't you?"

"I'll never forget the sight of his yacht leaving at full speed after running down our little sailboat. I clung to the wreckage until some Mexican fishermen picked me up, but my fiancé had slipped under by then. They took care of me in their fishing village for more than a month. Most of the time I was delirious. As I slowly got better they brought me a newspaper. It had the

story of our accident and said Romo had been cleared of blame after he told the authorities how he spent hours searching the water for survivors.

"After that, all I wanted to do was kill Nick Romo. When I read he would be in Acapulco, I went there and managed to meet him. I got him to bring me along on his yacht, and I waited for my chance. It still doesn't seem right for him to go free."

Remembering the look on Kagle's face, Hooker said, "I have a hunch Nick Romo will get his soon enough. Just be glad you didn't do anything foolish."

"I have you to thank for that. I owe you a lot, Hooker. Is there anything I can offer you for a down payment?"

The taxi wheeled into Ilopango Airport and pulled to a stop before the terminal. Hooker got out and held the door open.

"Send me a postcard from Muncie, Indiana," he said, "and we'll call it even."

Lacey raised on tiptoes to kiss him, then turned her bags over to a porter and walked swiftly into the terminal building without looking back.

*Apparently one cannot indiscriminately endorse that old maxim,
"Better to be safe than sorry."*

Alma



AL Nussbaum

THE DAY Alma Southerly was sent to us, my wife Silvia and I had been caring for foster children for close to twenty years. We were in our front yard, tying vines to a trellis, when the county station wagon pulled to the curb. Mrs. Dunbar of the county probation department climbed from behind the wheel; and Mrs. Snyder of the city welfare department got out on the passenger side, pulling the reluctant Alma after her. The women were big-

hipped and considerably overweight, so there had been little room between them on the seat; however, Alma hadn't needed much space.

We had been told to expect a thirteen-year-old, but Alma Southerly looked more like an undernourished ten-year-old. She was hardly more than four and a half feet of skin and bones; and her flesh was so translucent that blue veins could be seen at her temples and along her bare arms. She had large, sad eyes, like a waif in a painting by Keane, and her straight, shoulder-length hair was such a pale blonde it was almost white. Her lips were trembling and her face was wet with tears when Mrs. Snyder deposited her in front of us.

"I done wrong," she sobbed pitifully. "I done wrong," and our hearts went out to her immediately.

When Silvia and I first began taking children into our home, we had received referrals from both the courts and the welfare agencies. Soon, however, we established a record of success with delinquents, and the children sent to us were in-

variably wards of the courts with suspended sentences or waived prosecutions in their pasts.

It wasn't uncommon to discover that a child could lie, cheat or steal effortlessly. Over the years, we found just about every aberration that causes maladjustment in society. Since we'd had no children of our own, we treated each foster child as though he or she were one of the children we'd never had. We gave them love, trust, understanding and a taste of genuine family togetherness which many had never experienced.

As a result, we became expert at breaking through the facades of even the most hardened offenders, and we did it without reference to their prior records. We seldom read a child's file. We believed that whatever a child had done in the past was unimportant. We didn't feel we had to know of what devilry a child might be capable. If we had a fear, it was that we would someday be sent a child we couldn't help, a child like Alma Southerly.

Silvia and I bent to comfort the little girl and, surprisingly, instead of turning to my wife as the younger children always did, she turned to me. She stood in the circle of my uncertain arms and pressed her tear-streaked face against my side.

"I done wrong," she said be-

tween muffled sobs. "I done wrong, an' I awful sorry."

From her manner of speech, it was apparent Alma had spent most of her life in the hills of West Virginia or Tennessee, but if it hadn't been obvious, we would never have known it. Except for confessing she had "done wrong" and professing repentance, she volunteered no information. At the end of two weeks we knew as much about her as we had known a few minutes after her arrival. We hadn't been able to stop her tears and didn't even know how to try.

"Tom," my wife said after breakfast one morning, "you'd better drive down to the Youth Bureau and read Alma's file."

"Yes," I agreed. "I had better . . ."

Alma was on hands and knees, scrubbing the kitchen floor, when she heard her father call, "Al-mah! Al-mah!"

She stood up and wiped her hands on the hem of her dress. Then she hurried into the front room where he was sitting on the couch. He was wearing only his shorts and a sleeveless undershirt; but he seldom dressed during the daylight hours, so Alma thought nothing of it. That morning's newspaper was spread out before him on a low table.

"Come here, child," he said, indicating the seat beside him.

She went to him and sat down. She got along well with her father. He was usually laughing and in a good mood. He was more fun to be with than her mother, who was seldom home, and Alma liked the smell of tobacco and whiskey that clung to him like a sticky cloud. She knew he would have helped her with the housework if he weren't always feeling poorly.

"Yes, Papa?"

He cleared his throat. "Your ma ain't comin' home no more, child. We all alone now."

Alma didn't know what to say. She looked around dumbly for an explanation but found none. The newspaper was open to a story about an unidentified woman who had been found dead from an overdose of barbiturates in a motel room, but that had nothing to do with her ma.

Alma climbed onto her father's lap and put her arms around his neck. "I don't understand, Papa. She just went on a date, like always."

He cradled her in his arms and began to rock her back and forth the way she liked him to do. "There's nothin' t' understand, child. She just ain't comin' home no more, an' we gonna have t' find some new way t' make money."

"Papa, I betcha I could get dates," she offered brightly.

He paused in his rocking, as though considering the suggestion, then shook his head. "No, you're too little. It'll be another couple of years before you'll be big enough for dates. Till then, I'll just have t' think o' somethin' else."

"Maybe we could go home?" Alma asked hopefully.

"No, cain't do that. They just waitin' for your ol' pa to show his face back there. Don't you worry, though. I reckon I'll think o' somethin'."

True to his word, within the week he had thought of something—robbery. Alma listened to him explain her part as he drove his rust-spotted old sedan to the Tall Towers apartment complex in the center of the city. Each apartment tower was twenty stories high and almost self-sufficient. Their bases held laundries, markets, restaurants and most necessary services. The parking garages were on the third level, and self-service elevators operated from there.

He drove his car up the ramp to the parking area and left it in a space reserved for visiting clergy. Alma followed him, carrying a small, battered case that had once held roller skates, as he led the way to the elevator and pushed the button marked *Roof*.

"Now, remember what I tole you, child. These be all rich folks live here. Why, the newspaper said it costs at least a thousan' dollars every month t' live in these apartments, an' the higher up you goes, the more it costs. We should get enough money tonight t' last us for two-three months."

Alma followed close at his heels to the edge of the roof. She looked fearfully down while he tied a loop at one end of a length of dirty rope and placed it under her arms.

"You see that little balcony jus' below us?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Well, that's where I gonna put you. When you're down, see if the glass door's locked. It prob'ly won't be if the people is home. Then slip outta the rope and wait a couple o' minutes before you slide open the door. Move real quiet across the room, an' open the door t' the corridor for me."

Without further preliminaries he picked her up and dropped her over the edge. Alma swung precariously at the end of the rope for a few seconds, then landed on the balcony below, skinning her knee. She sat on the cool concrete, trying to control her fear, until he shook the line from above to remind her to check the door. It was unlocked. She wouldn't have to swing to another balcony, seeking an unlocked

door. With a sigh of relief, she took off the rope loop.

She waited a couple of minutes, listening. Then, shaking with apprehension, she carefully slid the glass door open and paused. She could hear only the ticking of a clock, so she tiptoed across the deep-pile rug to the corridor door. In a moment she had removed the chain latch and quietly eased back the bolt.

Her father pushed open the door and brushed past her. He set down the case he'd used to carry his rope, and took his pistol from beneath his jacket. With his free hand he reached out to touch her cheek. "You a good girl, Alma. You did jus' fine," he whispered.

Then he went to the door of the apartment's only bedroom and opened it. Alma followed and was beside him when he clicked on the light.

There were twin beds in the room, and a middle-aged couple had been asleep. The woman awoke when the light went on and sat up, clutching the bedclothes around her. She stared wide-eyed at Alma and her father; then her gaze focused on the large black revolver he held, and her mouth started to open.

"Jus' keep you mouth shut; woman. Don't you say nothin'," Alma's father ordered, and moved

forward, holding the pistol ready.

It took only a few minutes to wake the man and tie and gag the pair with strips torn from a sheet. When he was finished, they were lying on their sides with their arms and legs drawn up behind them and bulky gags covered their mouths. All they could do was watch while he and Alma searched the closets and dressing table for valuables.

Alma and her father took turns carrying their loot to the car in the parking garage. Each carried an armload of clothing, a suitcase stuffed with linen, or a small appliance—nothing that would be worthy of notice if they were seen, and which could be explained as donations if they were challenged. He saved the color television for last.

"Alma, honey," he said. "I gonna tote this-here television to the car." His pistol was gone from sight, and he now held a long, thin carving knife she'd seen him pick up in the kitchenette. "There's only one thing left for you to do here, honey, then I want you t' meet me at the car."

"Yes, Papa."

"You 'member how I use' t' butcher hogs back home? I'd hang 'em by their heels an' cut 'em quick an' deep?" He made a pantomiming gesture with the knife.

Alma wet her lips and hugged

herself to keep from trembling. "Yes, Papa."

"Well, I want you t' go into that-there bedroom and do for those folks. If we don't shut them up, they'll tell on us quick as you can spit. They'd have your ol' pa in prison for sure. You don't want that, do you?"

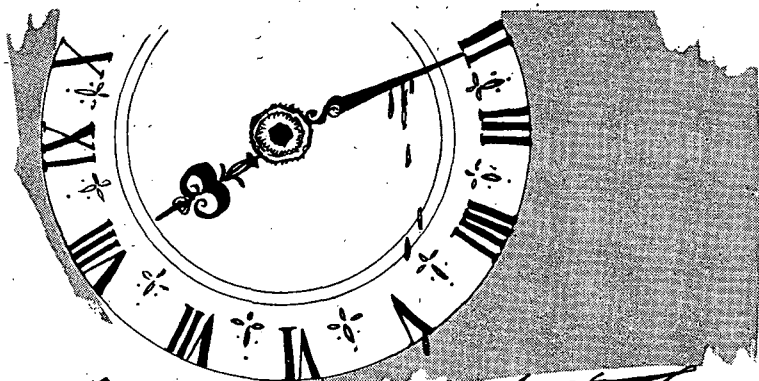
"No, Papa."

"That's my girl," he said, wrapping the fingers of her right hand around the handle of the knife. He gave her a gentle push toward the bedroom doorway. "I'll meet you at the car. You'd best hurry . . ."

"Oh!" Silvia broke in. "How horrible! No wonder the child feels so terribly. After butchering those helpless people, even if her worthless father *did* tell her to do it, it's no wonder her conscience won't let her rest."

I put my arms around Silvia to give her strength. "You don't understand," I said. "Alma's father was identified by the robbery victims and is serving a long sentence in the state prison. When Alma entered the bedroom with the knife in her hand, the people whimpered and cried for mercy behind their gags. She wasn't able to force herself to kill them as she'd been ordered to do. She let them live. *That's* what she's sorry about."

Contrary to an ancient axiom, frequently it is what one doesn't know that is more significant than certain knowledge.



Time Will Tell

JUDD WALKER had just finished lunch when he got the call. Stretched out in his big leather recliner, he was reaching for the tall, sweating glass of iced tea Mary had placed by his chair. When the phone rang, a familiar knot jerked tight in the pit of his stomach, and the tension of rebellion threw a lasso of taut muscle around his chest.

"Tear it out by the roots," he complained as he heaved his sturdily built 5'10" to his feet and

headed for the phone. "That's what I'm going to do. Tear it out by the roots. And then just once—maybe just once—I'll get to spend a Sunday at home.

"Walker," he growled into the mouthpiece.

"Sorry, Judd," the captain said from the other end of the line, "but we've got a murder on our hands."

Judd's brain snapped to attention. In a town of 10,000 people you didn't get many murders to handle. The last one was—when?

Three years ago? Questions raced through his mind.

"Who, Chief?"

"It's hard to believe. Old Pete Russell."

The knot in Judd's stomach had started to loosen, but now it turned into nausea. Mary, standing by as usual, the lift of her brows reflecting her anxiety, caught his expression and stepped closer. Her eyes asked questions he didn't want to answer. Judd gave her the hand gesture that meant he'd tell her later.

"I'm at Pete's house now, Judd. Better get on over here."

"Five minutes," Judd said, and hung up. He hesitated, facing Mary. When he finally spoke, his voice was as dark as his eyes. "Pete Russell's been murdered."

"Oh, no! Not that nice old man!"

"I've got to go," Judd said in a low, strained voice. "I'll see you."

Behind the wheel of the car, he took time for a couple of deep breaths. One thing he didn't need now was a wreck. He started the engine and backed out of the driveway with exaggerated care.

*by Nancy
Schachterle*

In the ten blocks' drive he thrashed around in his mind for some understanding, some reason why anybody would murder old Pete Russell. Anger rose in him full force. What would he be, 85, 86? A defenseless old man. He wondered how it had happened.

He'd seen Pete only last week, playing checkers in the park with one of the other old men in the sun. Tall, spare with age but barely stooped, always neatly dressed in suit and string tie, he never ventured outside without an ancient, well-brushed hat. Pete was bald, with a silver-white fringe on the sides of his head, matching the thick, white moustache he'd worn since the old days. His neck was wrinkled and scrawny, the cords standing like guardians beside his jutting Adam's apple, but Pete was always a figure of dignity, with ready humor and a smile for all. Judd would have said he was loved and respected by everybody, but it seemed he'd have been wrong.

Judd pulled to the curb behind the captain's cruiser. A small group of people stood by, eager to see whatever there was to see. Ignoring them, Judd covered the few steps to the minute front porch in long strides. It was a modest bungalow in a modest neighborhood. Word was that old Pete was worth quite a bit, but he certainly didn't live like

it. He was no miser, but he didn't toss his money around, either.

Dan Ramore, a junior officer, opened the door for him. Inside, the atmosphere of the little house was hot and suffocating. The first thing that struck Judd was the uncharacteristic chaos of Pete's front room. Captain Crowell, catching Judd's stunned stare, moved toward him.

"The old guy must have surprised whoever did it. Put up quite a fight, in spite of his age." His tone was tinged with a neat balance of triumph and respect.

Judd forced himself to look at the body. Pete, dressed in pajamas and a surprisingly natty maroon and black dressing gown, lay crumpled in the middle of the room, blood congealed by his head in a small, depressing pool.

Beyond his body was a coffee table, overturned, and beside it an ash tray and its burden of ashes and cigarette butts, along with several china figurines which Judd remembered Pete's wife had cherished. A falling lamp had smashed the screen of the big color television that was one of the few luxurious items in the room. An old-fashioned wooden striking clock, which Judd thought had stood on top of the TV, lay on its back a few feet away from Pete's head, the glass in its brass-rimmed door broken.

The crew was at work, quietly

efficient in spite of their lack of practice in murder cases. Doc Hansen, the county coroner, was standing by the body, making notes on the back of an envelope, and Carl Seavers was taking prints from a brass poker.

Judd glanced at the captain. The latter nodded.

"Beaten to death with the poker. It's a nasty job, Judd."

"I want it."

"I know, it's yours. You knew the old guy pretty well, didn't you?"

Judd nodded, silent. Memories flooded through his mind. "He was one of the real old-timers," he said. "Do you know much about him?"

Captain Crowell shook his head. "I should have, but I didn't. Makes me feel sort of bad now, somehow."

Judd was able to smile. "He was in Cripple Creek almost in its heyday. Boy, the stories he could tell you about those days! He wasn't there right at the height of the boom, but I guess it was still a wide-open town. Ran a saloon. Can you imagine it, the dignified old man we knew? Yeah, he ran a saloon on Myers Avenue. Made his pile there."

"Did he have much?"

"Quite a bit, actually, although you'd never guess it from the way he lived." Judd looked around at the shabby furnishings. "Pete never did believe in throwing his money



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around. In his earlier years, after he'd retired, he traveled quite a bit, but after his wife died it got too lonely, all by himself, so he just stayed put. He got pretty frail, too." Judd felt a sudden surge of anger again. "The poor, lonely old guy!"

"Didn't he have any family?"

"He was married in Cripple Creek, had two sons. One was killed in World War Two. When Pete retired, just after the war ended, he and his wife moved down here to be near the other son and his family. He had a turkey farm just outside of town, if I remember right. The whole family—son, his wife, and two boys—drowned one afternoon on a fishing expedition. I guess it just about drove Pete's wife crazy. She died six, eight years ago. So there he was, not a soul left, spinning out his last years playing checkers in the park." Judd shook his head. "Pete told me one time it almost got to him. Here he had all that money, and every time somebody died he got more insurance. Lose a son, get another \$10,000. And what good did it do him?"

"We've been trying to figure motive," Captain Crowell remarked. He gestured to the disorder around them. "Nothing like this in the rest of the place. He kept it shipshape. Clothes neatly hung up last night, keys and change in a caddy on the

dresser. His wallet was beside them, doesn't look as if it's been touched. Twelve dollars in it. Doesn't seem to be the work of somebody looking for money."

"Nobody who knew him would come here looking for money. He paid everything by check, never kept more than ten or fifteen dollars in cash on him. Who'd come to a house like this, looking for a bundle?"

Judd moved across the room to stand by the body of his friend. Kneeling carefully, he studied the brutally beaten head. Then he reached out and laid his hand on the old man's shoulder for an instant.

Straightening, he stepped back. Something crunched underfoot, and he chided himself for carelessness. He moved his foot and looked at the rug. The clock lay nearby, and he had accidentally stepped on a shard of glass from its door. Crouching, Judd inspected the clock closely. The hands had stopped at 8:10. A few spikes of glass remained in the rim of the door, and the rest of it lay on the carpet beside it.

Judd stood erect again and turned to Captain Crowell. "I suppose that's when it happened," he said, gesturing at the clock.

"Looks like. Doc Hansen says that as hot as it's been in here he

can't pin it any closer than a three or four-hour range between seven-thirty and ten-thirty or eleven last night. Mrs. What's-her-name next door says she noticed he didn't go to church this morning, so she checked on him in case he was sick. Guess he never missed a service. This is what she found. She screamed the place down and her husband called us."

"And now the question is, *cui bono*? Isn't that it?" Judd said.

"Who benefits? Yes, that's the first question."

"He did have some family, although they didn't have much to do with each other. Pete never thought much of them—his sister's grandchildren. You probably know them; Duane Fisher, sells insurance, his brother Matt, works as an assistant to the vet out west of town—what's his name?"

"Dixon? No, he's the one on the freeway."

Judd snapped his fingers. "Crawford! Matt works for him. And there's a sister, Della, works around town at any job she can hold down for a week at a time. Even though he didn't think much of them, Pete was pretty strong-minded when it came to family ties, so I imagine they get the money."

Captain Crowell walked over to the telephone, dialed and waited through a couple of rings.

"Bud? Sorry to bother you on a Sunday, but you handle Pete Russell's legal work, don't you?" He gave a curt summary of the situation. "Yeah, it's a nasty piece of work. Why I called you—who gets the money? Yeah? Yeah. That's what I was wondering. Thanks, Bud." He hung up and turned to the waiting Judd.

"You're right. Evenly divided, one-third each, except for quite a few charitable bequests. Bud says they stand to come in for close to \$40,000 each."

Judd whistled. "I knew he had plenty, but I had no idea it was that much! I'd call that motive enough in anybody's book."

"You figure one of them is capable of something like this?" The captain gestured with anger and disgust at the body that was just now being moved to a waiting stretcher.

"That's what I'm planning to find out. You don't need me here, do you?"

"No. You're on your own. We'll be through here in a few minutes."

"Guess I'll start with the neighbors." Judd began to move off.

"I can save you the trouble. Ramsey's done that already. Nobody saw anything, nobody heard anything."

Judd felt a lurch of disappointment. He needed a lead of some

kind, however faint. Behind the wheel of his car again, he wondered where to start. Duane Fisher, he knew, lived in a ten-year-old development on the east side of town, an area of too-cute log houses on streets with fanciful names. The brother, Matt, lived in quarters behind the vet's kennel. He'd have to find out from one of them where Della was now. Judd decided to try Duane first.

The car was stifling from standing in the afternoon heat, the wheel so hot Judd could barely hold it. He flipped on the air-conditioner, and it was just beginning to blow cool when he turned onto Acapulco Drive. Acapulco, indeed! He spotted the dark-green sedan which he knew Duane Fisher drove, and turned into the driveway behind it.

As he walked up the sidewalk, the drapes at the large front window stirred. Judd pushed the doorbell and heard a tiny rendition of the Westminster chimes from inside. The door opened with the last notes. A blonde in her late twenties, wearing an elaborate hairdo and too much eye makeup, eyed him with hostility.

"Yeah?"

"Is Mr. Fisher in?" Judd opened the aluminum screen door, noting its lack of harmony with the log siding.

"Duane!" The blonde made one

nasal syllable of the call, her eyes never leaving Judd's.

Fisher appeared from a tiny hall, barefoot and in shorts. He was about Judd's height, with pale blue eyes and a blond crew cut; his dull, colorless features wore an expression of noncommittal amiability.

"Oh, hi, Officer."

"May I come in?"

"Sure," Fisher offered. "You got the right place, though? I can't recall running any stop signs lately."

At this moment, Judd decided, he wasn't so much Pete Russell's friend as a cold-blooded policeman. He broke the news to Fisher with only as much tact as he felt he had to use, watching reactions keenly. Fisher expressed a proper amount of horror, admitted to the lack of sympathy between himself and the old man, and altogether showed a complete lack of any telltale expression. Judd, looking for any signs of over- or under-reaction, was disappointed.

The blonde wife stood to one side, watching her husband, speculation plain on her face. Judd felt she could hardly wait for him to leave before asking, "How much?"

Judd slipped a notebook and a pen from his pocket. "Just as a matter of record," he remarked blandly, "I'll need some information from you."

Fisher looked disconcerted. "What kind of information?"

"For instance, have you seen your uncle in the last few days, do you know of anyone who could have done this, where you yourself were yesterday."

"When was he . . . murdered?"

"Well," Judd hedged, "the coroner hasn't completed his examination yet. Your uncle lived alone, you know, and we haven't quite established the time of death. If you can just cover yesterday, say from noon on . . ."

"Well, yesterday afternoon I worked in my office here at the house most of the time. I went downtown about four for a coffee break with a couple of fellows." He turned to his wife. "I was home by about five, wasn't I?" She nodded. "After supper, the wife went to the movie with a girlfriend. I watched TV for a while, till about seven-thirty, quarter to eight, then I went down to the Drake Club and played poker with four or five other guys until around, say, nine-thirty. I wasn't doing so well, so I came home early. I went to bed around ten-thirty. The wife says she came in a little after eleven. I was asleep by then." He looked to her for confirmation. "I haven't seen the old guy, not to talk to, that is, for a couple of months. I haven't been near his house in at least that long. I

sure don't know why anybody would do a thing like that. We may not have seen eye to eye, but he wasn't a bad old sort. Getting a bit batty, but no harm, you know what I mean?"

Judd's jaw tightened. He made notes busily. "If you could just give me the names of some of these people you spent your time with . . ."

Fisher was eager to do so. Judd was familiar with most of them, and knew where he could find them for confirmation.

"You don't think I might have . . . ?" Fisher's voice was horrified.

"We've got to cover all the ground, you understand, sir," Judd told him. "Just a matter of routine. I think this is all I'll need, thank you. Now, could you tell me where I could find your sister?"

Fisher's brows went up. "You can't suspect her of this, surely?"

"Unfortunately, Mr. Fisher," Judd replied, "there isn't anyone whom we can suspect at this point. No, I just need to cover the same ground with her as I have with you, for the record. Strictly routine."

"Well, if that's all . . . Right now she's staying in that apartment over Clark's Furniture."

Judd felt that Fisher wanted to say more, excusing his sister. He knew the place, and it wasn't one

he'd want his sister living in. He thanked Fisher and moved on.

In spite of bright afternoon sun, the entrance to Della Fisher's apartment was shadowed and dingy. Judd knocked. Unconsciously, he brushed his knuckles off against his trouser leg as he waited.

As Judd was about to raise his hand to knock again, the door opened. The woman who stood there was taller than Duane Fisher, dark where Fisher was blond, and Judd remembered that she was a half-sister, born of a second wife. She was probably about 25, he guessed. She was dressed in a soiled white sleeveless blouse and ragged, faded jeans cut off above the knee. With the light behind her he couldn't read her face, but the tone of her voice was ungracious.

"What d'ya want?"

"May I come in?" Judd doubted if the apartment would be any more attractive than the grubby hall, but he'd be less at a disadvantage.

"What d'ya want?" she repeated.

Judd stepped forward and was relieved when she avoided a confrontation by backing into the room. "I'm afraid I have bad news for you," he began.

He noted that she was human enough for a flicker of anxiety in the surly hazel eyes that never left his face. He told her as much as he

had her brother, watching her just as closely.

Hearing the appalling news, Della Fisher shrugged, an indifferent lift of the shoulders that used a minimum of energy. "That's too bad. I'm sorry for the old guy. But he wan't nothin' to me. I suppose I should say thanks for tellin' me, anyhow."

Judd eyed her with speculation. Could this woman have sneaked into Pete's house, picked up the brass poker, and cold-bloodedly beaten him to death? Physically, yes. She could have handled the old man easily. Judd wished she weren't such an unsavory person, so that his judgment wasn't naturally biased.

He brought out his pen and notebook. "Now, if you don't mind . . ." He explained his need for information as he had to Fisher.

"Gee, you'd think I'd knocked the old guy on the head."

"We have to rule out every possibility. Just start around noon yesterday."

Her brow wrinkled. Old makeup had clotted orange in the furrows. "Noon. Well, I was out lookin' for work yesterday. Lessee, I went to Grandma's Diner first, spent about twenty minutes, half an hour. Had a cuppa coffee. Lousy coffee they make. Just as glad I didn't get the job." She named several more stops and Judd made notes.

"And what about last night?"

"I had supper with a fellow I know from Denver." She gave him the name. "We went to the Red Pheasant. They know me there, can tell you. We sat around till . . . I guess it was close to eight o'clock. Then we came on up here for a drink. We just sat around and talked till he left. Nothin' wrong, you understand. He's a married man. We just get along together."

To his own surprise, Judd believed her. There was a convincing honesty, a lack of archness in her delivery. "And what time was that?"

She raised her eyes to the ceiling, and cocked one eye shut in thought. "Is it important?"

"It could be. Just as close as you can remember, for now."

"I'd say a little after ten-thirty. Say, you won't . . . You don't have to ask him, do you? I mean, him married and all that, I wouldn't want to embarrass him. Some women, they don't understand these platonic things."

Judd smiled. "We'll see. It may go no further than this." Unexpectedly, he found himself relaxing from his first opinion of her. He closed his notebook. "You wouldn't happen to know if your brother Matt is around the kennels on a Sunday?"

"Him? He never goes anywhere

else. Exploited, that's what he is." Judd was amused by her vocabulary. "Got a sick cow, or a birthing dog, you name it, Matt's the one they count on to look after it on a weekend. He thrives on it, though. Crazy about animals. Always has been."

When Judd tracked down Matt Fisher in the vet's stables, he believed her. He found the slight, blond man, almost a twin to his brother, hunkered over a Hereford calf, gentling it with his hands and murmuring to it in soothing tones. Once he realized Judd was there, he straightened and faced him.

"She'll make it," he said reassuringly. "Had a rough time of it, but she'll make it now."

Judd pondered, then decided the stable was as good a place to talk as any. He made his announcement for the third time.

Something like panic leaped into Matt Fisher's eyes. Judd's heart gave a surprised surge. Surely not? It wasn't this easy. With an odd reluctance, he pressed close on the heels of his own words.

"But that's no surprise to you, is it, Fisher?"

"If you don't mind, Sergeant Walker, could we move over to the small-animal hospital? I got a bitch there coming out of the anesthetic, and I sort of like to be with them if I can. She's been spayed. Good dog,

too. I hate to see them spayed." He moved quickly across the yard, soft gray dust puffing at each footstep.

Judd followed, caught up with him as he opened the door of the small-animal clinic. With a hand on Matt's arm, he asked his question again. "I said, 'That's no surprise to you, is it?'"

Fisher moved on into the cool, dark interior, refusing to meet Judd's eyes. "I'm sorry it happened. It's an awful thing to happen to anybody, and I liked the old man. I know he didn't have much use for us, thought the younger generation was good for nothing, but he was a good old sort." He opened a cage and lifted out a drowsy beagle bitch.

"Here you are, Salome." He laid her on a polished steel operating table, passing his small, brown hand along her cheek. He glanced up at Judd conspiratorially. "Silly names they give dogs."

Judd was disconcerted. Was he hedging, or was he, to use the expression of Judd's spinster aunt, "not quite all there"?

"Fisher," he asked, "did you murder your uncle?"

Matt spun around on one heel, his eyes frantic. "Of course not! What gave you a damn-fool idea like that?"

"When did you learn of his murder? You already knew when I



came here, didn't you, Fisher?"

Matt drew a thick fold of the beagle's loose skin into his fist, half-turned away from Judd. He seemed to draw assurance from his patient.

"Duane phoned me after you'd been there. He said not to say nothing, about him phoning, I mean. But that doesn't mean I killed him. Why would I want to do a thing like that?"

"Where were you when it happened?" Judd asked.

"Duane said you weren't sure when that was."

"Sounds like Duane said quite a bit. Did he also tell you what to say?"

Matt stopped fondling Salome and whipped around to face Judd. "I don't need nobody to tell me what to say! He said you wanted to

know where he'd been from noon yesterday on. Doc Crawford can tell you I was here all day yesterday. I live right back there." He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I was there all the time, out here checking on the animals, or there, reading and watching TV. And I've been around here all day today."

"Anybody who can back you up?"

"What d'you mean?" Matt was beginning to sound hostile.

"Well, we can't just take your word for it you were back there reading while Pete was being murdered. Was anybody with you?"

A flare of alarm seemed to go off in Matt's eyes. He backed against the operating table as if physically threatened. *Guilty or simple?* Judd wondered.

"No, of course not. I live alone."

"So you have no alibi?"

"I don't need one. I didn't kill him. I wouldn't hurt an old man like that. Just get off my back, will you?"

"For the present," Judd said ominously, and turned toward the door.

His last glimpse of Matt Fisher showed him with his head burrowed against the beagle, his shoulders slumped in a discouraged attitude.

For the next few hours Judd crisscrossed the city, checking with the various people who could verify

alibis for Duane and Della Fisher. The salesman from Denver would have to wait. For the time being he'd take Della's word for it. The three men he found at home confirmed the fact that Duane Fisher had been at their table at the Drake Club from a little before eight until roughly nine-thirty.

Judd made his last stop before home at the police station. Captain Crowell was in his office, crossed feet on the desk, thinking into steepled fingers. He looked up when Judd came in and swung his feet down.

"Find anything?"

Judd summarized the afternoon's activities for him. "So it looks," he concluded, "as if Duane Fisher has an alibi, Della may have one, and Matt has none at all. Lacking physical evidence, that doesn't help us much. You fellows come up with anything?"

"Smudged prints on the poker. Nothing else inside the house. Outside, a few footprints but they'll probably check out to be the mailman or a delivery boy. We've got some casts, and Ramore's working on it."

"Duane or Matt?" Judd mused. "Duane has an alibi. Matt has none. You know, given my druthers, I'd druther it was Duane. I'll tell you, Chief, in spite of the queer way he acted, I just can't see Matt Fisher

smashing old Pete over the head with a poker. Not the way he handles animals."

"I've known people who wouldn't dream of kicking a dog who'd gladly club an old man to death for a few dollars."

Judd sighed. "I suppose you're right. People just aren't simple to figure."

"Might as well knock off for today, anyway, Judd. You can get a fresh start in the morning."

Judd slept badly that night. He'd found that in a small town the cases usually involved people you knew, and he was not a man to be dispassionate. He woke shortly after six, and lay quietly for a few moments, thinking over Sunday's events. Finally, about six-thirty he slipped quietly out of bed, showered, shaved and dressed. As he moved into the kitchen for his first cup of coffee, he heard Mary stirring in the bedroom.

Reaching a mug from the cupboard, he turned to the coffeepot, which Mary always fixed the night before and plugged into the timed receptacle on the electric stove. He was unusually early, but she timed it to be ready by six-thirty. He poured into his mug. Cold water!

"Mary! Damn it, the coffee isn't ready!"

Mary appeared from the hallway, hairbrush in hand, looking puzzled.

"It should be. That's strange."

She walked over to the stove and felt the coffeepot.

"I just told you it wasn't done. Damn it, Mary, you know how I feel about coffee in the morning." He slammed the mug he was still holding onto the counter and turned toward the door. "I'll get some downtown," he growled.

Mary whirled in front of him. "You will not! It'll only take five minutes here, and you'll have your blasted coffee." Her eyes were furious. "One day out of the year the coffee isn't ready, and you make a federal case out of it. Just don't give me any of that, Judd Walker!"

Judd sat down at the kitchen table, feeling a little sheepish but trying not to show it. "Well, it's always ready," he said in a subdued tone. "How come it isn't this morning?"

Mary turned back to the stove. "I don't understand it." She studied the controls. "Oh, oh! Judd, I'm sorry. It's my fault. I cleaned the oven while you were gone yesterday to keep me from thinking about poor old Mr. Russell, and I turned off the power. The clock's almost an hour slow. I forgot to change it when I turned the power back on. I'm sorry."

Judd got up and looked. With a proprietary air he placed a hand on Mary's shoulder and said graciously,

"That's all right, Mary. I'll forgive you this time."

She ducked out from under his hand and turned on him. "You'll forgive me! Now hear this! Another outburst like this morning and you'll go to work with a couple of black eyes, you hear me?"

Judd laughed. "Okay, Irish! I'm on bended knee, and all that. I can see how it could happen. We don't have a clock in this house that's right if the power goes off. What we need is an old-fashioned winding clock like that one Pete Russell had. It tells the right time all the time."

Then Judd's brain started to work on that remark. Who said it told the right time? They'd presumed because the clock was lying smashed on the floor, stopped at 8:10, that Pete had been murdered about then. But it wasn't unheard of, tampering with a clock. Suppose it had been turned back, or forward? Judd remembered that it was a striking clock. How would turning the hands affect the striking mechanism? And how would a different time of death affect the alibis of the people most likely to benefit from Pete's death?

"Just thought of something, hon," he said. "I can't wait. I'll get coffee downtown when I get time. See you."

He stopped at headquarters to

get Pete's keys, and to be assured nothing had been touched at the house. He found the clock where it had fallen, beside the pitiful chalk outline of where Pete had lain. Kneeling, he studied it, trying to remember how it had been when he first saw it. Crushed glass still lay on the rug where he had accidentally stepped on it the day before. The rest of it, except for what had stuck in the rim of the door, still lay beside the clock.

Judd sighed deeply, straightened, and went back to headquarters. Captain Crowell was standing by the big coffeepot in the outer office.

"Captain," Judd asked, pouring coffee for himself, "do you know if anybody touched the clock at Pete's before I saw it yesterday?"

Crowell thought. "No, not as far as I know. We looked at it, saw it was stopped, but nobody moved it. After you left, Seavers dusted it for prints, but he was careful and hardly moved it at all. Why? Got an angle?"

Judd told him.

Crowell nodded slowly, considering possibilities.

"Judd, that fits in with something that came up this morning. The neighbors we checked with hadn't seen or heard anything, but after the seven o'clock news this morning Ramore took a call from a woman

who lives across the alley from old Pete. She said she took her garbage out a little before ten o'clock and saw somebody coming out of Pete's the back way. A man, medium height, looked blond in the moonlight, fairly young. Said she might not have noticed him except he looked sort of furtive. Saw her looking at him and turned his face away, hurried up the alley."

"Could have been Fisher."

"Which one?"

"Come to think of it, either one. Duane and Matt look pretty much alike."

"And Matt has no alibi."

"Well," Judd said, "when you come right down to it, Duane has no alibi for after nine-thirty, either, remember?"

"No, he hasn't."

"That is, if the clock was changed. When I first saw it, it hadn't been touched, right?"

"Right."

"And at that time, most of the glass was on the rug. In fact, I stepped on some. Now," his eyes narrowed as he tried to project himself mentally back to Pete's front room, "suppose the clock was broken. Then the murderer turned it back. He'd have to open the door to get at the hands."

"That's right."

"And the glass would come tumbling out onto the floor?"

"Mhmm. I'm still following you."

"And if nobody had fooled with it, the glass would still be on the inside of the door."

"I'm with you all the way."

Judd rubbed his hand thoughtfully along the side of his jaw. "The other fellows come up with anything yet?" he asked.

"Those casts I mentioned. After we heard about somebody coming out of Pete's, I sent Ramore to check on shoes from both Matt and Duane Fisher. He should be in soon."

"Look, Chief," Judd said, "I've got something perking I want to check on. I'll be back soon."

He drove from headquarters to the center of town carefully, his mind nibbling busily away at his theory. He angled into a vacant parking space and strode into a small jewelry store.

"Hi, Judd." Marvin Beck, the tall, slim young manager, approached him with hand outstretched. Although he smiled in greeting, his eyes were solemn. As Judd shook his hand, he remarked in a tone that showed real concern: "Terrible about Pete."

"That's why I'm here. Do you happen to know the old-fashioned clock that stood on Pete's TV?"

"Sure do. I gave it to him. Back when Pete was still doing occasional jobs to keep busy, he filled in

noon-hours and then over at the liquor store. He used to bring me a bottle once in a while. Wouldn't take a cent, so when he admired that clock one day I gave it to him. What about it?"

Judd told him. He asked the questions he'd come to ask and got his answers.

"Marv," Judd asked, "I wonder if you'd care to do me a favor?"

"Anything, Judd, especially if it'll help catch whoever murdered Pete. He was pretty special to me."

Judd explained what he had in mind. "It's a matter of timing and psychology."

He drove back to headquarters. Dan Ramore was just going in the door ahead of him, two shoe boxes under his arm.

Judd hurried to catch up with him. "What did you find?"

"Come on into Captain Crowell's office and I'll tell you both at the same time."

They moved into the chief's office. Captain Crowell shuffled some papers from the clutter on his desk into a pile, making a clear spot where Dan could put the boxes down. The latter opened the first box with the air of a magician about to produce a pair of white doves.

"Here," he said, "we have the cast of a footprint found beneath Pete's kitchen window. You'll no-

tice," and his voice took on the light tone that combined instructional banter and a hint of triumph, "that it is a toe print only. The depth would indicate—"

"Okay, Ramore," the chief snapped. "Get on with it and skip the histrionics."

Ramore grinned. "A man approximately five feet, nine inches tall, weighing in the neighborhood of one hundred and sixty pounds, stood on tiptoe outside that window, from which you can see through the kitchen into the front room. He wore a size eight sneaker with a hole just ahead of the arch." He took the lid from the second box. "And here we have a size eight sneaker with a hole just ahead of the arch."

Judd snatched the sneaker from his hand and inspected the worn spot. His eyes swung sharply to Ramore's face. "Okay, whose?"

"Fisher." Ramore's eyes twinkled mischievously, and then he thought better of it. "Duane Fisher," he continued.

Judd's heavy sigh breathed both relief and frustration. He exchanged glances with his chief. "The alibi."

Crowell nodded. "Unless we can break it."

"He said he hadn't been near the house in months." Judd turned to Dan Ramore. "What'd he say when you picked up the shoes?"

"He wasn't there. His wife let me in. Wanted to give me trouble at first, but then she decided to cooperate."

"Chief," Judd said, "I'd like to try something. Can we pick him up for questioning?"

"It's your baby, Judd. If you think you can get anywhere, by all means pick him up."

"Got any idea where he is right now?" Judd asked Ramore.

"Wife said he was having coffee at the Red Pheasant."

"Get him."

Ramore left and Judd reached for the phone. He was whistling through his teeth as he dialed, a nervous, sibilant sound that betrayed his anxiety. Was he moving too fast? He didn't want to blow this one. So far they had very little case, and that little depended on which way the cat would jump.

"Marv? I'm ready for you, if you can come up now, okay? Yeah, thanks."

Judd tried to work while he waited for Ramore to bring in Duane Fisher, but he couldn't. His stomach alternately throbbed and jerked, and he remembered that he'd had nothing all morning but one cup of coffee. On the table by the coffeepot he found a box of doughnuts. He ate two, of them, finding them tasty but dry. They sat heavily on his stomach as he

marked time making himself busy.

Marvin Beck turned up before Ramore got back. Judd took him into the interrogation room and the two men talked quietly while they waited. When time had stretched so long that Judd had almost decided things were going to go all wrong, they heard an imperative knock on the door. Judd opened it a few inches. Dan Ramore stood there, with Fisher, wary-eyed, a few steps behind him.

Judd and Dan conferred for a moment in deep, heavy whispers, Judd casting what he hoped were disquieting glances at Fisher every few seconds. Finally, Judd turned back to Marv Beck inside the room.

"Well, Marv, you can go now," he said. "You've given us just the information we need." He glanced at Fisher again with a grim look and ushered Marv out of the room with a hand on his shoulder. "Thanks a lot." Then, as if on an afterthought: "Dan, I don't believe you know Marv Beck, from the clock shop downtown." The two men shook hands.

Judd jerked his head at Fisher. "Okay, Fisher. We're ready for you now."

Dan Ramore slipped into the room behind Fisher and sat down in a corner near the desk. With a flip of his hand, Judd motioned Fisher to a seat across the desk from him.

"I believe Patrolman Ramore informed you of your rights?" he inquired politely.

"He did. It doesn't really matter. I haven't done anything, so I don't have to worry about my rights."

Judd nodded judiciously, his lower lip thrust forward, and noted with satisfaction that Fisher shifted position in his chair uncomfortably. Judd unbuttoned his tunic pocket and removed his notebook, flipping its pages ostentatiously.

"You said, I believe, that on the night of your uncle's murder you played poker at the Drake Club from a little before eight o'clock until just about nine-thirty?"

"That's right."

"And the rest of the evening you spent at home, alone?"

Fisher nodded. "Mhmm."

"You also stated that you hadn't been near your uncle's house for months?"

"That's right. Maybe not months. It might be only about six weeks. I don't keep track."

"All right. Let's say six weeks." Judd moved as if to change his notes, then suddenly lunged across the desk, stabbing at Fisher with his forefinger. "Then how do you account for the fact that somebody saw you leaving your uncle's house that night?"

Fisher jerked back in his chair. "That's not true! I haven't been

near my uncle's place for weeks!"

Judd leaned forward, his eyes never leaving Fisher's. In a deep voice he said "Drop it, Fisher. You were seen."

Fisher's hand started up as if to wipe his perspiring forehead, and stopped in mid-gesture. It dropped to his lap limply. "Whoever says they saw me lies. It wasn't me. Not that night."

Judd gestured to Dan. "Get the shoes."

Ramore slipped quietly out of the room and returned immediately with the boxes, the one with his cast and the other with Fisher's shoes. He put them on the desk. With satisfaction, Judd saw Fisher's eyes widen as he recognized the second box.

Judd opened the first box and lifted out the cast. "Cold. We've got you cold," he announced.

"What're you talking about?"

"You left your prints behind, Fisher," Judd told him. "Nice little tippytoe print, where you sneaked a look into the window before you went inside." He opened the shoe box. "You recognize this, don't you? Your sneaker, and it fits the print perfectly, right down to the hole in the sole." He reversed the sneaker in his grip to point to the worn spot.

Fisher seemed to be pondering. He caressed his left shoulder ab-

sently. "Oh, yeah," he announced. "Now I remember. I stopped by one day to see if the old guy was in, looked in the back window a minute. Couldn't see hide nor hair of him, so I figured he was asleep and went on home. You can't make a federal case out of that. Besides, it doesn't make much difference, does it? You know I couldn't have murdered him. I've got plenty of witnesses to prove where I was when that happened."

Judd's eyebrows arched upward. "I don't remember establishing a time for that."

Fisher's head jerked nervously. "I thought . . . Didn't you say . . . ? Well, I just figured it was sometime in the evening."

"It was," Judd let the statement lie heavy on the atmosphere.

"Well, then, what d'you want from me? It seems to me I've given you all the information I can."

Judd leaned his elbows on the desk, pursing his lower lip with his index fingers. His head rocked slightly. His eyes never left Fisher's. A drop of sweat slipped away from the other man's temple and ran into his skimpy sideburns, leaving a shiny trail like a slug's.

"There was a clock," Judd said.

The muscles in Fisher's forehead contracted, but he said nothing. He rubbed his shoulder again.

"Looks as if it got smashed in the

fight," Judd went on. "Oh, yes, the old man put up quite a fight for a guy his age. Clock said 8:10."

Fisher slumped back into his chair, relaxed. "I was playing poker then. What d'you need with me?" He moved as if to rise.

Judd wigwagged his hand at him. "Just a minute. You were playing poker until nine-thirty. Is that right?"

Fisher nodded. He swallowed nervously.

"So that leaves you on your own from nine-thirty until your wife came in about eleven?"

"You could put it that way. I was home all that time, except for the few minutes it took to get there from the Drake Club."

Judd stood up and moved around the desk. "It would certainly seem you have an alibi until at least nine-thirty." He clapped his hand suddenly on Fisher's shoulder. The latter flinched and cried out, ducking away from his hand.

"What's the matter, Fisher? Got a sore shoulder?"

Fisher was rubbing the spot, his face screwed up in pain. "You oughta watch where you grab a person," he muttered.

Judd leaned forward to draw Fisher's shirt aside, peering inside. Fisher drew away pettishly.

"What're you up to?"

"Nasty bruise you got there,

Fisher." Judd started back around the desk. Then he whirled to face Fisher again. "Did the old man catch you a clout before you got him?"

Fisher almost screamed. "What're you talking about? I haven't been near the old man. I told you. I haven't seen him in weeks."

"Footprints, Fisher," Judd said in a tone loaded with suggestion. "Footprints. Inside and out. Now don't try to tell us you weren't in the house."

"Okay! So I was in the house! But it wasn't yesterday. It was the day before. I never saw him yesterday."

"Why didn't you tell us before that you were in the house?"

"Just for this very reason. You'd start badgering me, making something out of it that wasn't there."

"An innocent man can say where he's been without any need to worry."

"I've told you. I'm covered for the time he was killed. From well before eight until nine-thirty I was in full view of five, maybe six men. You said yourself he was killed at 8:10. You check. I was covered!"

Judd leaned back, smiling menacingly. Then he swung forward to lean across the desk again. "You said he was killed at 8:10, Fisher. Not me. I said the clock showed 8:10. Did you know it's a striking

clock your uncle had, Fisher?"

"What d'ya mean?"

"It strikes the hour and the half-hour." Judd reached forward and tapped his pen against a large brass ash tray on the desk in front of him. "Like this. Bong! Bong! Bong! Three." The ash tray rang resonantly.

Judd stood up and strode across the room. He swung on his heel and turned to face Fisher again. "You didn't stop to think, did you, Fisher, what would happen to the striking mechanism when you turned the clock back?" He paced a few quick steps closer. "Marv Beck knows, Fisher. He's an expert on clocks. You didn't figure what would happen when we started that clock again, did you, Fisher?"

Sweat was beaded at Fisher's hairline and trickling down his neck. He tugged at his collar. The tip of his tongue flicked along his upper lip. He said nothing.

Judd moved back to the desk, pen poised. "It should have struck once, like this." The pen struck the ash tray again and the clear tone sounded once. Judd watched Fisher. "But it didn't, did it, Fisher? It didn't strike eight-thirty, did it? You can hear it now, can't you, Fisher?"

The pen hovered above the ash tray.

"Not 8:30," Judd repeated. "No!

Listen, Fisher." The pen began to strike the ash tray with a slow, steady beat. Bong! Bong! Bong! "Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten!" Judd shouted the last count into Fisher's face.

"Ten, Fisher! You shoved it back, but you forgot the strike. Ten, Fisher, not eight-thirty. Now, where's that alibi of yours?"

Fisher dropped his face into his hands, his head hunched deep between his shoulders. Judd and Dan waited, then Judd pressed his advantage.

"Why did you do it? Couldn't you wait for the old man's money?"

The other man lifted an anguished, twisted face. "She was going to leave me. Nothing was good enough for her. She was going to leave me, unless I got some money somewhere. Every time I got into a poker game I got in deeper. So I went up to his place and tried to get a loan out of him. He had plenty. It wouldn't have hurt him. But he wouldn't listen. Called me a spendthrift, all sorts of things. He was yelling at me, and I got so mad I wanted to strangle him. Then I

found my hands around his skinny old throat. He grabbed a poker, started beating on me. I had to take it away from him! He would have killed me. I tell you, he was crazy! I took it away from him. I guess I must have hit him back. The next thing I knew, he was lying there, just lying there, with the blood oozing out of his head." He put his head into his hands again, sobbing.

Judd, limp and white, jerked his head at Ramore. "Get him out of here, and get a statement." He walked out of the room ahead of them. Across the squad room he saw Marv Beck waiting for him. Shoulders sagging wearily, he went up to him.

Marv looked up. "Did it work?"

"It worked."

"I'm glad we didn't have to demonstrate it. As I told you, turning the clock back like that, you never know what it would do to the striking mechanism. It could strike once, it could strike thirteen. You just never know."

Judd sighed heavily. "Yeah. You knew that, and I knew that—but Fisher didn't know that."



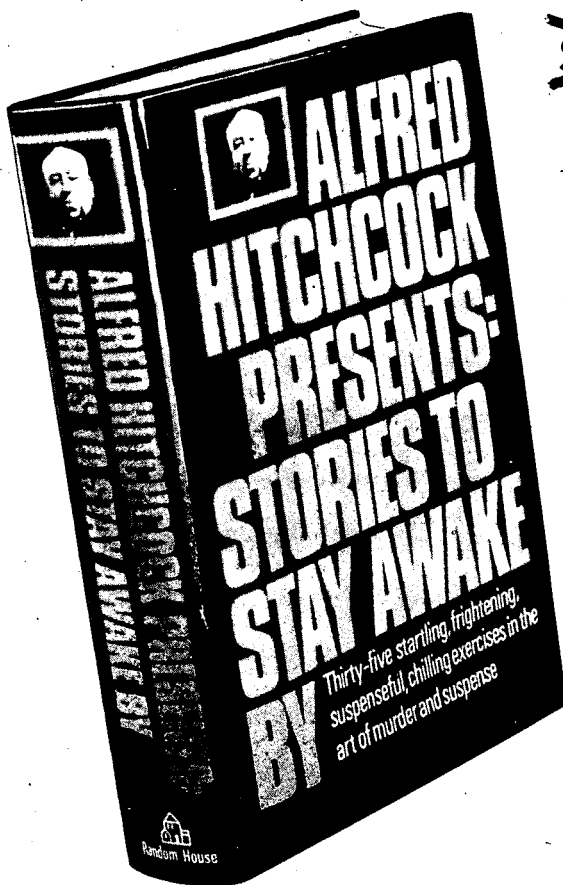
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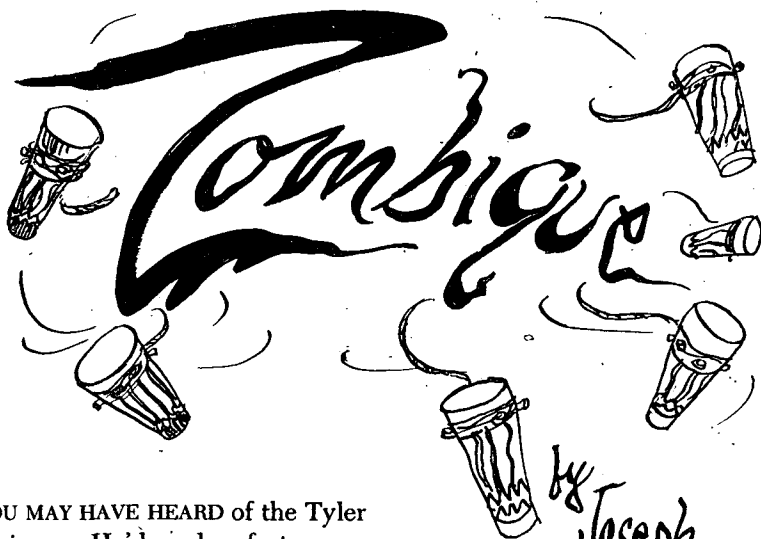
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Proverbially, two birds can be had with one stone—but suppose it ricochets?



YOU MAY HAVE HEARD of the Tyler Marinsons. He'd made a fortune on "the street" before he was thirty. Finally, he had tired of the stock market shuffle, bought a superb country house with fifty acres in Barsted, Connecticut, closed his New York office and began leading the life of a country gentleman.

He still had investments, of course, and he watched them closely, but his market maneuvers became little more than a hobby. If all of his remaining stock investments had been wiped out, it wouldn't have mattered much. He

by
**Joseph
Payne
Brennan**

had enough real estate, municipal bonds, notes, trust funds, cash and personal property to survive almost anything except revolution or a nuclear attack.

He stayed on several boards of directors to "keep a hand in," as he expressed it.

His wife, Maria, was delighted with her new life. She'd hated New

York and she loved the country. For nearly a year the Marinsons lived almost like recluses. They seldom entertained; they went to New York only twice in ten months.

At length, however, Maria felt that her husband was getting restless. She began having house parties and frequent weekend guests. Tyler, off the tightrope of tension which he had walked in New York, slipped easily into the new scheme of things. The Marinson house parties became "musts" and Tyler himself turned into something of a raconteur.

They were a handsome couple in their mid-thirties, childless but not a bit maladjusted. Tyler was tall and dark, with fine chiseled features; Maria, small and blonde, with the kind of arresting blue eyes that look unreal.

They met Kemley through the Paulmanns. Kemley had "made" it in oil, and spent most of his time poking around the Caribbean. He became the Marinsons' "pet." He was a bachelor nearing fifty and Maria, with a persistence which amused him, kept steering various women friends—widows mostly—in his direction. It became a standing joke between them. Kemley adored her and respected Tyler. He never returned from one of his jaunts without bringing back some souvenir for the two of them.

It wasn't easy. One doesn't buy typical tourist baubles for people like the Marinsons. Kemley concentrated on curios which, while not always expensive, were hard to get. Tyler appreciated them and Maria always received them with the wide-eyed enthusiasm of a child.

It was one of Kemley's curio gifts which precipitated the business; or maybe it was all coincidence. You'll have to judge for yourself.

Shortly after a trip to Haiti, Kemley brought the Marinsons a Haitian "voodoo" doll. About four inches high, it was carved out of hard native wood, tufted with feathers and mounted on a thick wooden base. Branching from each side of it were narrow metal rods ending in carved wooden cylinders which resembled drums. The figure was so attached to the base that when one of the rods or drums was given a push, the doll would execute a grotesque dance atop the base, twirling, bobbing and swaying as if suddenly animated with a life of its own.

Kemley told the Marinsons that if you wanted to bring bad luck to an enemy, someone you hated, you twirled the doll, spoke its name—*Zombique*—and told it what you wanted.

Tyler was fascinated by it but, for once, Maria's enthusiasm seemed forced. After Kemley had

left, she admitted to her husband that she didn't like the figure. She confessed, in fact, that she was afraid of it.

Tyler joshed her about it, twirled the doll, spoke its name and asked that old Harrington's steel stocks drop twenty points.

The next day Harrington's steel stocks moved up two points. Tyler duly brought this to Maria's attention.

She frowned. "You didn't actually fulfill the conditions," she pointed out. "Harrington was never your enemy; you were just rivals. You never *hated* him. And you didn't *really* want his steel to drop twenty points."

Tyler laughed. "Maybe you're right at that. Anyhow, it's all a bag of nonsense."

The Haitian doll remained on the mantel and Maria gradually forgot about it.

Then Tyler had a furious row with Jake Seff, owner of the local Atlas Garage. What it amounted to, in brief, was that the Atlas had done a shoddy repair job on Tyler's favorite sports car and then had grossly overcharged him for the inferior work. Jake Seff stubbornly refused to do the work over and just as stubbornly refused to reduce his bill.

Tyler came home swearing like a whole platoon of troopers. Maria

tried to placate him, but he sulked and brooded the entire evening.

"But, darling," she pleaded as they prepared for bed, "it's only a few hundred dollars!"

Tyler scowled. "That's not the point. I don't like being made a fool of because I have money. I accumulated that money by my wits and it wasn't easy. I took some pretty big risks. Seff thinks he can clip me and get away with it. Thinks I'll just shrug it off. Well, I won't!"

The next day he made telephone calls during the morning, then left after lunch. He returned in time for cocktails, still furious but more self-contained than on the previous day.

Over drinks, he told Maria that he had checked into the financial status of the Atlas Garage. Jake Seff, he revealed, was nearing the brink of bankruptcy. He was so desperate for cash he had even allowed his insurance on the garage to lapse.

Tyler refilled his glass. "He's not only unscrupulous, he's plain stupid. That insurance should get priority over everything. He wouldn't get a dime if the garage burned down; he'd be finished."

Maria tried to change the subject, but Tyler wasn't listening. He paced around the room. By chance he stopped near the mantel, which held Kemley's Haitian voodoo doll.

He set down his glass. "I'm going to try it!"

Maria came over. "Tyler! That's childish!"

He ignored her. Flicking a finger against one of the drums, he triggered the feathered doll into its twirling, bobbing dance.

"Zombique!" he commanded. "Burn down Jake Seff's Atlas Garage!"

Maria sighed and sat down. "Tyler, I don't like this. You shouldn't hate anyone like that. Let's get rid

of that horrid thing!" she begged:

Tyler picked up his glass. "What? Get rid of it? Old Kemley would never forgive us. He looks to see if it's still on the mantelpiece every time he comes."

The next morning when Maria came down to breakfast, Tyler was already reading an area newspaper as he sipped his orange juice. Pointing to a brief paragraph, he handed her the paper without a word.

She read the headline—*Seff's Garage Burns; Total Ruin*—and turned white.

"Tyler! You didn't—"

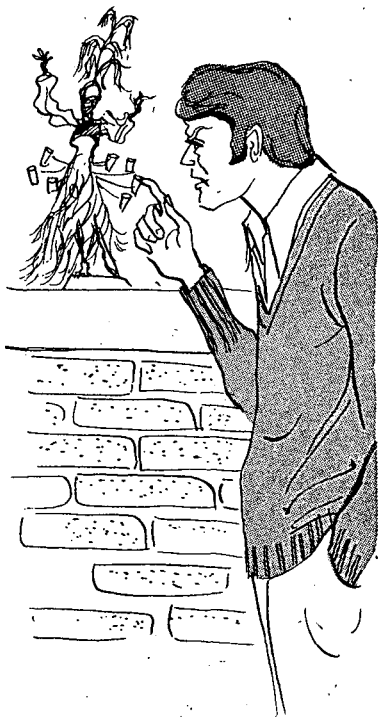
"What? Set fire to Seff's junkyard garage? Don't be a silly goose! And that doll had nothing to do with it either. It's all just a crazy coincidence."

Ignoring her orange juice, Maria poured a cup of coffee. She sipped it black. "Tyler, please take that voodoo thing out of the house and burn it—or throw it in the woods."

Tyler looked across at her. "You're talking like a ten-year-old. These things happen once in a while. Pity you can't see the humor in it. We could both have a good laugh!"

Maria shook her head. "Somebody's bankruptcy is nothing to laugh about, even if he is dishonest. And now I'm *really* afraid of that nasty little puppet."

Tyler finished his coffee and



stood up. "Well, I think I'll take a spin to the village. Need a few things from Carson's store."

Maria watched as he slipped on his coat. "You just want to drive past Seff's and look at the smoking ruins!" she said with a vehemence which surprised him.

He shrugged and went out the door.

The voodoo doll remained on the mantel, but it was weeks before Maria appeared to throw off her uneasiness concerning it. On several occasions Tyler almost yielded to an impulse to destroy the doll, but each time a certain implacable element in his nature, grounded, it seemed, in the very bedrock of his being, asserted itself. The Haitian doll stayed on the mantel.

Then Tyler was arrested by Sergeant Skepley. Maria was home, bedded down by the flu, and Tyler had to make one of his infrequent trips to New York. The directors' meeting lasted late; it was already dusk by the time he reached the parkway.

He traveled well over the limit all the way up to Hartford and nobody bothered him. He slowed down for the cutoff, but by the time he reached the outskirts of Barsted he was over the posted limit again. The roads in Barsted are narrow and winding. You were reasonably safe at thirty-five, but definitely not

at fifty-five, which was hazardous.

Tyler was fretting about Maria and inwardly cursing Templeton, whose long, tedious spiel had held up the directors' meeting, when he saw the flashing red lights in his rear-view mirror.

Momentarily he pressed the accelerator a bit farther toward the floor. He thought better of it, however, slowed up and finally braked to a stop.

The police car pulled up behind him, red signal lights still flashing. Tyler had his license and registration cards ready by the time the sergeant came abreast of his own car window.

As the sergeant studied the documents, Tyler studied the sergeant: young, officious-looking, already a sergeant. No sense telling him he had a sick wife at home alone.

The sergeant pulled a printed form out of his pocket. "I'm placing charges, Mr. Marinson, for reckless driving, for exceeding the speed limit and for attempting to evade arrest."

Marinson felt the blood rush to his face. "Now, wait a minute! Maybe I was over the limit, but you can't throw the whole book at me! What's this about evading?"

The sergeant's humorless eyes stared back at him. "When you first noticed my lights, Mr. Marinson, you hit your gas pedal. That's 'at-

tempting to evade,'" he explained.

He turned toward the patrol car. "I'll need about ten minutes to fill out this arrest form, Mr. Marinson."

Marinson sat waiting, flushed with rage. Twenty minutes passed before the sergeant returned with the completed form.

He started to explain something about Circuit Court in Meriden but Marinson snatched the form out of his hand, threw it on the car seat and turned the ignition key.

"It's on the form, isn't it?" he asked furiously. "I can read!"

When he got around the next curve in the road, he experienced an impulse to press the gas pedal down to the floor. He glanced in the rear-view mirror. The sergeant's prowl car was already coming around the curve.

When he reached home, he was trembling with fury. He drove into the garage and sat for a few minutes before going inside.

Maria said she felt better but she hadn't eaten and she still looked feverish. He wanted to call Doctor Clane again but she shook her head.

"I called him this afternoon. He said to go on with the medication, stay in bed and drink a lot of fluids. He said it runs its course and I'll be better in a few days."

Tyler sat with her for an hour before going down to get an improvised dinner snack. He had told her

about the tedious directors' meeting but not about his arrest.

The kitchen looked uninviting. He decided he wasn't hungry and went into the livingroom. Pouring a stiff Scotch and soda, he took out the arrest form.

The form indicated that he had to appear in Circuit Court in Meriden on a specified date, unless he chose to plead not guilty. In that case, he had to notify the court and he would be informed of a subsequent date for appearance.

The arresting officer was a Sergeant Skepley.

Swearing, Tyler threw down the form. He was well-known in the town. Any other member of the force, he told himself, would have given him a simple warning or, at worst, a summons which could be mailed in with a nominal fine. Skepley, he remembered, had a reputation for toughness. Recalling the sergeant's steady, somewhat bulging eyes and compressed lips, Marinson concluded that he was not merely tough but actually sadistic.

After another drink, he decided to fight the case. He'd call Boatner's law firm tomorrow morning. They had a branch in nearby Hartford. He knew young Millward who was in charge of it. Millward would get him off the hook if anybody could.

He felt better after the third

drink. He poured a fourth, sprawling back in his chair with a sigh of relative contentment. As he glanced toward the mantel, he noticed the Haitian doll.

He set down his drink and crossed the room.

Flicking his forefinger against one of the wooden drums attached to the figure, he triggered the feathered doll into motion. Bobbing, nodding and swaying, it performed a macabre little dance.

"Zombique!" he commanded, "make Sergeant Skepley drop dead! Dead, dead, dead!" he repeated as the dance slowed and the puppet came to rest.

Returning to his chair, he decided to finish off the bottle of Scotch.

He woke up with a nagging hangover the next morning. Maria was fretful and feverish and didn't want to eat.

He telephoned Boatner's law office in Hartford before ten o'clock. Millward hadn't arrived yet. He left no message but said he'd call back.

He tried again shortly before eleven. Millward had arrived but was in conference and couldn't be disturbed. Did he want to leave a message? Muttering, Tyler hung up.

After pacing the floor for a few minutes, he went up to see Maria.

She was reading in bed and seemed somewhat better. He told

her he had to talk to Millward but hadn't been able to reach him by telephone.

Maria laid down her book. "Tyler, you're so restless, you're making me nervous! Why don't you just drive into Hartford and see Millward?"

When he murmured something about leaving her alone, she scoffed. "The phone's next to my bed, and anyway I'm better. You've been wound up tight ever since that directors' meeting. You don't need to fuss over me. Go and talk to Millward. Something's making you positively jumpy!"

Picking up her book, she waved a mock good-bye.

He kissed her and grinned. "If I were a doctor, you'd be my favorite patient! All right. I'll see you later, then."

He drove to Hartford, taking his time down Farmington Avenue. When he arrived at Boatner's, Millward had already left for lunch. Tyler went out for a cocktail and a sandwich and came back an hour later.

This time Millward was in. Tyler told his story, getting angry all over again.

Millward sat back, put his fingertips together and pushed up his glasses. Marinson observed that he was beginning to get paunchy.

Millward's smile held a tinge of

deprecation. "Things aren't the way they used to be, Tyler. At least not here in Connecticut. To squash something like this is almost impossible. The best we can do is get some delays and stall for the right judge. With luck, you'll hang onto your license. This Skepley must have a reputation and you did have a sick wife at home. We'll see what we can do."

Marinson thanked him and stood up. He felt a keen sense of disappointment. A few years ago, in New York, Millward would have taken the ticket and torn it up in front of him. Then there'd be a slap on the back and a drink from Millward's private flask.

Tyler started homeward in a thoughtful mood, vaguely troubled and apprehensive. His money and presence, he reflected, no longer seemed to matter as much as formerly.

He drove through the small center of Barsted, noticing that it appeared nearly deserted. As he swung into Postgate Road, which led to his house, an ambulance pulled into view. It wasn't going very fast and the siren wasn't on. He stared into it as it passed. A figure lay in the back, covered with a blanket.

He stopped, hesitated and very nearly backed around to follow the ambulance. He changed his mind

and drove on, feeling his stomach constrict. Postgate Road lay in a relatively isolated area. There were only two houses besides his own on the entire length of it.

Ten minutes later he topped the rise which led to his house and the bottom fell out of his world.

There was no house—only a smoking sprawl of blackened timbers, brick chimneys and collapsed pipes, sagging crazily in every direction.

He managed to stop the car. As he sat transfixed, a man in a corduroy suit came over. It was someone he recognized but he couldn't recall who it was.

"Take it easy, Mr. Marinson. We did all we could. I'm sorry, awful sorry."

Staring around, Marinson saw the Barsted Volunteer Fire Company trucks, police cars and at least a dozen civilian cars. His lawn, he decided, would be a frightful mess.

Abruptly, he started the car. "I'm going after my wife," he said. "She was in that ambulance."

People were hovering around the car. A hand closed on his wrist. Someone stood there, looking mournful, shaking his head.

"Your wife wasn't in the ambulance, Mr. Marinson."

He got out of the car, suddenly furious. "What is this? Of course it was my wife. What are you tell-

ing—? Surely you can't mean—?”

He stopped and stared toward the smoking ruins of his house. His eyes sought the others' eyes. Not a single pair of them would meet his own.

A sob shook him. He ran toward the twisted, blackened debris. “Marial!”

Someone put an arm around his shoulder. He looked up dully and turned away, then stopped, puzzled. “My wife's body . . . You say . . . Who was in the ambulance?”

A familiar voice replied. “That was Sergeant Skepley in the ambulance. He's dead. He came by here on patrol, far as we can figure out, saw the place on fire and ran to see if anyone was inside. He never made it. He dropped dead halfway between his car and the house. Heart attack, we think. Massive.

Shortly after, I guess, the Conforde saw flames shooting over the trees and called the fire volunteers. They got here in record time but too late. Your wife must have been overcome with smoke. She never—got out.”

Marinson stumbled toward the ruins. He stopped, staring.

The livingroom's brick chimney and its attached marble mantel were still standing.

Although its feathers had been burned off, the Haitian doll remained on the mantel shelf. The fine-grained wood from which it was carved had somehow survived the sudden inferno of flames.

A wind had risen, buffeting against the miniature drums fastened to the tiny figure. Bobbing, swaying and bowing, it executed a bizarre little dance of death.

» » » » » » » » WATCH OUT « « « « « « « «

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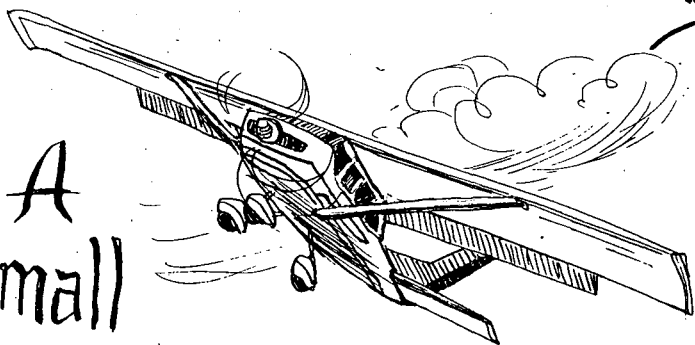
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Some sacrifice is required for one of the best things in life.

A Small Price to Pay



"He can't afford to," Chet said dryly.

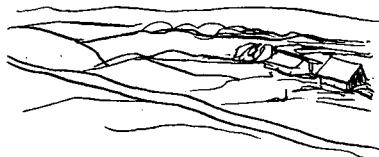
Ten minutes later the engine coughed once. My eyes automatically flicked to the fuel-pressure gauge; the needle was bouncing. I let the nose drop a little and scanned the tree-covered mountains

AN HOUR after we dropped off our passenger, climbed to fifty-five hundred feet and headed home with the setting sun on our tail, the radio in the Cessna gave one final squawk and died.

Chet Jenkins looked at me and shrugged. "Lucky it's a nice, clear day and we don't need it."

"I told Fred before we left there was something wrong with it. He wouldn't listen."

A Novelette



below; rolling folds shadowed in the valleys. The engine coughed again, sputtered and quit.

"This side, Sam," Chet said softly. "Almost directly below."

I stood the Cessna on a wing tip and hauled it around. Alongside a creek in a valley, a postage-stamp clearing beckoned. I rolled the plane out and set up my glide path, glancing at Chet. "I knew you'd bring me bad luck—first the radio, now this. Why didn't you stay home? I could have handled this one alone."

He grinned. "Fred's idea, not mine. I guess he hates to see me sitting around with nothing to do."

The air rushing past held a steady note. "How does it look on your side?" I asked.

"Good from here."

The field had become larger but not by much. The Cessna would make a close fit. The big question was whether we could fix whatever

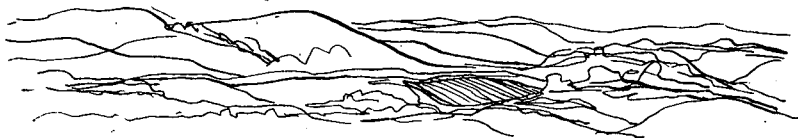
was wrong with the engine and take off again. We'd try hard, anyway, as Fred didn't have enough capital in back of him to afford having the Cessna dismantled and hauled out. His charter service was strictly local, catering mostly to businessmen in a hurry. We flew the single-engine Cessna, a twin Beechcraft and a beat-up helicopter that was out of service more often than not. We also used the Cessna to teach an occasional student.

I began refining my gliding circle to lay an approach close to the field.

Chet and I had been flying for Fred for two years now, and Fred gave us a piece of the microscopic profits. We would hardly ever become rich, but it was an enjoyable life and a comfortable one.

It kept me well fed anyway, which was a job in itself. I'd weighed twelve pounds at birth, which caused my father to tag me

by Stephen Wasylyk



with the name of Samson. I'd grown up to his expectations, standing six feet four and weighing two hundred and thirty pounds. Chet, on the other hand, was small and slightly built. It was a good thing, otherwise we never would have fit into a cockpit side by side.

Chet chuckled suddenly. "Now you won't be able to get that haircut."

I grinned. I'd let my hair grow long so that it curled down over my neck and up over my ears. I thought I looked great, but it kept business-conscious Fred in a state of exasperation until he made a deal with me. If I wanted to continue working for him, I had to get it cut as soon as I returned from this trip. I hadn't decided to take him up on it yet. I liked the long hair, and I was just stubborn enough not to have it trimmed. A haircut was too high a price for my independence.

I rolled the Cessna level and dropped the flaps. The field paralleled the creek and slanted uphill slightly. I kicked the Cessna into a sharp sideslip as soon as we cleared the trees, holding it to the last moment before straightening it out and dropping the plane close to the creek.

Rocking and pitching across the rough ground, I held the control column hard and prayed we wouldn't hit a soft spot or a big

rock. My prayers went unanswered. There was a sickening jolt as the left wheel hit something and spun the Cessna around.

"Lousy landing," Chet said wryly.

I unfastened my belt, opened the door and stepped out. The wheel had dropped into a shallow watercourse and hit a sharp stone. I cursed softly. I could try a hundred times and never manage to blow the tire again.

"No takeoff tonight," I told Chet, pointing at the slashed tire. "We'll have to call Fred to drive up here with a new one or fly it up here with the chopper."

"I saw buildings up on the hill as we were coming down. Might be a phone up there."

I nodded. "Lead the way."

The buildings consisted of a ramshackle, weather-beaten barn with sagging doors and the burned-out hulk of what was once a farmhouse. Both were a hundred yards in from a narrow, blacktop road.

"I always wondered about your eyesight," I said. "Is this what you saw?"

"The only other thing for miles is trees," said Chet. "Be dark soon. I can't say I care for the idea of walking along some back-country road at night."

"Do we have a choice? Fred will worry if he doesn't hear from us."

He had been looking at the dirt with a puzzled expression on his face. "Hold it," he said.

He walked to the barn and pulled at one of the doors until it opened enough to let him slide through. I followed curiously.

I found him standing inside the entrance, hands on hips, frowning at a late-model, dust-covered blue sedan. "What's this thing doing here?" he asked.

It was dim in the barn but the car looked in good shape. I peered in the front window. The keys were in the ignition. "Looks like our transportation problem is solved if we can find the owner."

"The thing can't be abandoned." He cupped a hand to his mouth. "Hey!" His voice echoed in the emptiness.

I looked around the barn. The car was parked in the center. To the right were stalls that had been knocked down, the partitions still lying there. To the left was a loaded hayloft above more dismantled stalls; two widely spaced studs were all that remained to support it. In one corner, under the loft, was a small enclosure that had evidently been a tack room.

I reached out and tentatively pushed against one of the studs supporting the hayloft. It shifted, the hayloft groaned ominously and I jerked my hand away.

"Samson slew the Philistines by collapsing the pillars of the temple, but this is no temple and there are no Philistines here," Chet said. "Take it easy. You're too big to go throwing your weight around." He moved toward the tack room. "I think I'll look in here."

I watched him open the door and step inside. There was a grunt and the sound of something falling.

I tensed and moved forward. "Chet!"

He didn't answer.

I stepped through the door. There was one dirty window in the room and in the fading light of day I could see Chet sprawled on the floor. Beyond him were some boards laid across two sawhorses to form a makeshift table, on which were several small jars, a small box and some glassine envelopes scattered over the surface. I caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of my eye and had just enough time to form an impression of two men standing there, one big, the other smaller, before the club in the big man's hand smashed against my head. I must have been out before I hit the floor.

I came to slowly, conscious of a tremendous headache, taking a few moments to remember where I was. Night had fallen, so it was dark in the small room.

I pushed myself to my hands and knees on the rough floor, suppressed a groan and tried to stand up. It was too much effort. On my knees, I gingerly examined the lump on the side of my head, winced and wondered what would have happened if I hadn't half-ducked.

I found out when I fumbled in my pocket, located my seldom-used lighter and flicked it on. In the yellow light, I could see. Chet stretched out before me. I shook him. He rolled limply. I felt for his pulse and found none, and I knelt there trying to absorb it, trying to understand it and not succeeding.

Chet was dead and all we had done was walk into an abandoned barn.

I stood up slowly, wondering what to do next. The glow from the lighter showed me a half-consumed candle poked into a bottle on the makeshift table. I touched the lighter to it and as it flared up, I realized the table was empty—the jars, the box and the glassine envelopes gone—and I wondered if I had only imagined them.

In the soft light of the candle, Chet's body looked unreal, almost as if he were sprawled there taking a nap. I saw for the first time the ugly stain on the back of his blond head. Intentionally or not, the big man had hit him much too hard

with the heavy ax handle now lying at my feet. Angrily I picked it up and slung it into a corner.

I stood there wondering what to do next, wondering how I was going to get out of there, how I was going to get help. Then I remembered the car in the barn. I picked up the candle and checked. The car was gone.

Fingering my aching head, I pressed on the sizeable lump gingerly as if it would make me think more clearly.

I sighed and returned to the small room, placed the candle on the table and looked around for something to cover Chet. I would have to leave and start walking until I found help, but it seemed indecent to leave him like this.

"Hold it right there!" The harsh voice came from behind me.

I froze.

"Turn around," said the voice.

I turned. The voice belonged to a heavyset guy wearing a badge, backed by a khaki uniform, broad-brimmed hat, service revolver and flashlight held steadily on me.

The beam of the flashlight dipped to Chet's body. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's dead."

"You kill him?"

"Of course not."

"You better explain."

I started with the forced landing.

wrenched my wrists behind me and cuffed them.

"I don't like people who resist arrest," he said softly. He hauled me to my feet and pushed me toward the door, snuffing the candle and pointing the way with the flashlight.

I lifted a shoulder to try to wipe away the blood I could feel trickling down my face.

His car was parked in front of the barn, a black police cruiser with the rear seat meshed in. He pushed me into it, locked me up without a word, then slid behind the wheel and headed toward the road.

Twenty minutes later we were in a small town. A somber, black, Gothic-towered courthouse in the center of a tree-lined square loomed big in the dim starlight.

He turned into a driveway, cut across the square and dipped beneath the courthouse, parked the car and hustled me out into a small office where a white-haired, pleasant-looking man was sitting with his feet up on a desk. When the man saw me, the feet came down with a crash and I could see his sheriff's badge.

"What's this supposed to be, Gates?" he growled.

"Found him out at the Klemper place with a body, Sims."

Sims stood up. "What kind of body?"

"Another man. Looks like he smashed his head in with an ax handle."

"So you left everything? Why didn't you call in and wait?"

"That new radio isn't working. I was on my way in when I saw a light in the barn and stopped to investigate. Found him standing over the body."

Sims pointed to a chair. "Take the cuffs off and sit him down. What happened to his head?"

"He tried to run. I couldn't take chances with a guy this big."

I grimaced. Gates wasn't above lying to make a point.

"Get the doc. We'll fix him up and then go out there. You tell him his rights?"

"Not yet."

"Dammit, when are you going to learn?" He pulled a card from a desk drawer and began to read. If my head didn't hurt so much, I would have laughed.

Sims looked up at me. "What's your name?"

"Samson Long."

"Who was the dead man?"

I explained the whole thing again.

He snorted when I finished. "Two men at the Klemper place? Been nobody there for more than a year, since old man Klemper died and the house burned down. It looks like you're in trouble. You're

going to need a very good lawyer."

I pointed to my bruised head. "What about this?"

"Gates already admitted he hit you." He pushed the phone on his desk toward me. "You better call that lawyer."

"I'd rather call my boss. He'll be worried."

"I guess that's a reasonable request. Tell him you're being held in the sheriff's office in Springfield."

I dialed Fred, some hundred and sixty miles away. He was probably so worried by now he didn't know what to do next.

Fred immediately leaped to the conclusion we had cracked up and that was how Chet had been killed. I could visualize the expression on his thin, hawk-nosed face, the pale-blue eyes wide behind the steel-rimmed spectacles, the battered, weather-stained felt hat he always wore pushed back.

"I still can't believe it, but I'll be there in the morning," he said.

"I'll need a lawyer," I told him. "And you'd better bring along a spare wheel for the Cessna, although I don't know who you can get to fly it out."

"You'll do it, I promise. That sheriff must be nuts, and you can tell him I said so. In the meantime keep your mouth closed. I'll bring the checkbook and we'll get that lawyer, the best there is, even if we

have to fly him in. Hang in there, and I'll see you by the time they serve you breakfast."

I hung up reluctantly, not wanting to break contact with the only friendly voice I'd heard in hours.

"You willing to sign a statement?" Sims asked.

"I'll wait until I get some advice."

"Fair enough. We'll put you in a cell and go on out to the Klemper place."

Gates had come back with the doctor, a tall, thin, young man who looked at me curiously. He fingered the bump on my head. "You do this?" he asked Gates.

Gates shrugged.

The doctor shook his head. "No matter what he did, you didn't have to hit him this hard. He could have a slight concussion. If he doesn't, that mop of hair saved him."

"Don't have time to take him to the hospital now," said Sims. "It will have to wait until we get back."

"If anything happens to him . . ." said the doctor, working on my scalp. "You better leave Gates here. If this man gets nauseated or dizzy, he'll have to get him to the hospital."

"Never mind that," I said. "Let him get out and look for those two men."

"Where is he going to look?"

Sims growled. "And what is he going to look for? Those descriptions you gave us don't mean a thing. One big and one small. You could have made up something better than that." He waved. "Put him in a cell."

It must have been a law-abiding town. Of the four cells in the block, only mine was occupied, so there was no one I could talk to, nothing I could do except pace up and down wondering how it had all happened.

I had given up counting my footsteps when Gates came to the cell.

Gun in hand, he unlocked the door and motioned me out. "Sims wants me to run you over to the hospital to get that head checked."

I started past him when he punched me in the kidneys, dropping me to my knees.

"No hospital, hippie," he said. "You and I are here alone and I have a tape recorder set up and waiting." He lifted the gun. "Don't make any moves. This cuts you down to my size."

I arched my back painfully and rose to my feet. He let me stand up before jabbing the gun into my stomach hard, doubling me over.

"No use complaining," he said. "There won't be any bruises. All I want you to do is tell me what really happened in that barn."

I had enough sense to know he'd keep pounding me if I didn't get out of there. I was suddenly tired of being pushed around. I straightened fast, hand outstretched to clamp over the gun butt. I squeezed, mashing his fingers against the hard metal, enjoying the pain in his eyes before bringing my fist up, my full weight behind the punch. He went down hard.

I scooped up his revolver and moved fast then, down the hall, through the office and out the door. Running hard, I went up the sloping driveway and across the tree-lined square. It must have been late or the town closed down early. The square was deserted, few people walking in the surrounding streets.

A shiny, fastback sedan was stopped for a light at the edge of the square, which reminded me that I needed transportation before Gates woke up and started after me. I yanked the door open and slid inside just as the light changed.

The driver was female, young and pretty in the dim light. I held the gun up so that she could see it. "Move," I said softly.

The car leaped forward. She looked at me out of the corner of her eye and I had the feeling she was more wary than frightened.

The town was so small that in a few minutes we were passing widely spaced houses. I twisted

around and looked out the rear window. There were no lights following. From the way I had hit Gates, I really didn't expect any.

"Take the next turn and stop," I told her.

She obeyed. "Now what?" There was no quaver in her voice and I looked at her closely. She was more attractive in the dim light from the dashboard than I had first thought. Her dark hair was cut short and curled around her head. Her features were regular, and at the moment her full lips were pulled up in a quizzical smile. One thing was sure, she wasn't afraid of me or my gun. Her mouth opened.

"Keep quiet and let me think," I said.

"Where do you intend to run, Mr. Long?"

"You know me?"

Her voice was amused. "By morning everyone will know you. There are no secrets in a town this size."

"How did you get ahead of the pack?"

"I have an advantage. I'm the reporter for the local paper. Gates called my editor with the story. He wouldn't miss a chance to get his name in the paper. How did you get away?"

"I hit Gates very hard."

"If you intend to run, you're wasting time."

"I don't want to run," I said slowly. "That will do me little good. What I want to know is why Chet had to die and why they tagged me with it."

"My editor said you insisted you weren't guilty."

"At least someone heard me. Where is he now?"

"Like any good newsman, he went out to the barn with Harry Sims and the doctor to cover the story. I was on my way to the sheriff's office to see if I could interview you. You saved me the trouble."

"I should be out there. There must be something in that place that would help me."

"I doubt if Sheriff Sims could find it. He accepts things at face value. It's the easy way out."

It seemed to me that Sims and the doctor wouldn't linger at the barn. They would do what had to be done and get back to town quickly, because as far as Sims was concerned, he had a suspect and he'd want to continue the questioning. If what she said was true, he wouldn't be looking around the barn trying to prove anything one way or the other. At least he wouldn't disturb anything. If I could get in there after they left it . . .

I had one big problem—I didn't know how to find the place. I turned to the girl. "You're going to

drive me out to that barn—right?”

“You don’t have to wave that gun. I’m agreeable.”

I leaned back and studied her. “Someone else would be at least a little bit frightened. Instead, you’re very helpful. I wonder why.”

She smiled. “I don’t think you’re anyone to be afraid of, in spite of being so big, and I neglected to mention I’m the paper’s only reporter, so I’m really covering a big story firsthand. I won’t help you right now because that would be aiding and abetting, but I won’t oppose you, either. After all, you do have that gun.”

Car lights flashed in the rear window. I spun. A police car was pulling up in back of us. I tucked the gun under my right thigh. “Play it cool,” I told the girl. “Just follow my lead.”

A state policeman left the car and started toward us. I pulled the girl toward me and fastened my lips to hers. They were cool, firm and responsive, which surprised the hell out of me.

The patrolman flashed his light through the window. “Break it up,” he said wearily.

I let her go and leaned back out of the light. She turned and smiled at the patrolman. “What’s wrong?”

“You live around here?”

She shook her head.

“Then move it,” he said harshly.

“This street is no lover’s lane.”

“Yes, sir,” she said brightly.

“Anything you say.”

He flashed the light briefly at me.

“Find another spot, buddy.”

I nodded and breathed a sigh of relief as he went back to his car.

She giggled. “Too bad he won’t give us time for an encore.”

She was too much for me. I wondered what it would take to shake this girl. I hadn’t been in control of the situation—*she* had; and she could easily have tipped off that patrolman that something was wrong.

“You could have told him,” I said.

“I’m on your side,” she said quietly.

Shaking my head, I reached down and switched on the ignition.

“Let’s go,” I said. “He’s watching.”

Putting the car in motion, she said, “Now that we’re acquainted, don’t you think we ought to introduce ourselves formally? I’m Eve Croydon.”

I grinned. “The only thing you should care about is that I’m a suspected murderer and I have a gun.”

“I’ve always felt a man was innocent until proved guilty.”

She drove well, winding in and out of small roads as she worked her way toward the barn. Finally, she pulled onto a cement highway that looked vaguely familiar. I was sure

of it when we passed a small cavalcade of cars coming from the other direction. The first one was a black police car and I automatically put my hand up to my face.

I don't know what I was worried about. Sims wouldn't expect to see me there and it was too dark to recognize me in the brief glimpse he might have had. The blackness of the night did nothing to rid me of the feeling that the slightest mistake on my part would land me back in that jail before I had a chance to clear myself.

Eve turned into a narrow road and followed it for a short distance. The barn loomed in the darkness.

"They may have left someone here," I said. "Pull up beyond it."

Eve sniffed. "Sheriff Sims would never think of something like that."

We left the car off the road among some trees. In addition to the gun, I now held a flashlight she carried clipped to the steering column, like the careful driver she obviously was. Walking down the dark road, I looked longingly in the direction of the small field where our crippled plane was parked, wishing there were nothing wrong with it and that I could wheel it around and take off as soon as it was dawn.

I shrugged away the thought. Running would solve nothing.

"Where do you intend to start?"

Eve asked. "If you don't mind . . ."
"Tell me what you know about this place."

"A man named Klemper owned it. He not only worked the farm but acted as a hunting and fishing guide. That's why the landing strip was there—he had several clients who used to fly in. He died several years ago and left no relatives, so the estate was never really settled. Last year, the house caught on fire for some reason and burned to the ground."

"Did they ever find out why?"

"No. Everyone suspected some kids had broken in and did it accidentally."

Or two men, using a candle in an empty house, could have tipped it over, I thought. They would have then moved to the barn.

At the edge of the barnyard, I held her arm to stop her and looked the barn over closely. In the dark, I couldn't see much of anything, which was a good sign. If there had been a car it would have been a dark patch in the barnyard, and if anyone had been left behind, it was certain they would have a light of some sort.

I pulled her forward gently.

"You don't mind if I feel a little nervous," she said.

"If you do, it's the first time tonight."

The sagging doors were still

partly open. We slipped into the blackness inside before I switched on the flashlight. The barn was empty. I led the way to the tack room knowing that if I were going to find anything, it would be there.

I flashed the light around. Naturally, Sims had taken the ax handle, and I suddenly remembered it would have my fingerprints on it. The makeshift table was untouched, the candle still there. The wooden walls were studded with hooks, and the board floor was spotted with wisps of hay. There just wasn't anything out of the ordinary, and I wondered what I had expected to find.

I was turning away, disappointed, when something on the tabletop flashed in the rays of the flashlight. I bent forward and picked it up. It was one of the small glassine envelopes I had seen. Without a word, I handed it to Eve.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know, but there were a lot of them here this afternoon."

Casually, I reached down and spread the loose planks of the table to see if there were any others. There weren't, but as I moved the boards some fine white powder drifted down, a miniature snowfall in the flashlight rays. I examined the edge of a plank. Some of the powder still clung there.

The two men had been working

on the table and had spilled white powder which had fallen into the cracks and stayed there. *Putting the white powder into the small glassine bags?*

I lit the candle and clicked off the flashlight.

Eve stopped suddenly and picked up something. "What is this doing here?" It was a small red pill.

"I don't know," I said, "but we'd better save it." I knelt and scooped some of the powder into the glassine envelope, and in the process, spotted a bright yellow capsule nestled into a floorboard crack. I dug it out.

The image of a photograph I had seen recently in a magazine came to me then. Covering a full page, it had pictured a jumble of varicolored pills and capsules, with small glassine envelopes and crude cigarettes mixed in. *Narcotics.*

Somewhere along the line, bulk shipments had to be broken down into individual packets before they were sold to the pushers, and it looked like this tack room had been used for exactly that. Which explained why the two men hadn't wanted Chet and me walking in on them.

I tucked the flashlight under one arm, took the red pill from Eve and placed it in the glassine envelope along with the powder and the yellow capsule.

"What does it mean?" asked Eve. I told her what I thought.

"You think this place was used as a distribution point?"

"I know very little about narcotics, but I can't imagine a big market here."

She hesitated. "Not here. Not in town. But at the university . . ."

"The university?"

"Not too far away. There was a big scandal recently concerning drugs. They knew some students were taking them, but they couldn't find out where they were coming from."

"It's possible," I said. "Just possible."

"But why here?"

"They could hardly have a center on campus. Better to pick a convenient place close at hand."

"You think the two men were students?" Eve asked.

"I doubt it. Students wouldn't have set up the operation. The two men were probably the suppliers."

Her lips pursed thoughtfully.

"Something bothering you?"

"Just my reporter's curiosity. I wonder if that is all there is to it—two men splitting up narcotics so that they can peddle them to some college students."

I shrugged. "It will do for a start. What is more important, I don't know the two men or where to find them, and who is going to believe

me anyway? But it is something."

"I have a friend, Allen Mercer, who might help. He's a professor of sociology at the university—has a Ph.D. in social psychology."

I grinned. "What does that prove? That he likes people?"

She became confused and slightly embarrassed. "It sounds impressive. Anyway, I'm sure he'd help if I asked him."

"If *you* asked him?"

Her face flushed again. "Well, he is a good friend."

"How good?"

"He's asked me to marry him."

"What did *you* say?" For some reason the answer seemed important.

"I would think about it."

I chuckled. "If you have to do that, take my advice—forget it."

"I'm sorry I mentioned it," she said coldly.

"Don't be. Maybe he can help, and I need all the friends I can get. He might know something about the drug problem at the university."

"Allen?" She smiled. "He's too deeply involved, working on something he won't even tell me about. Allen is very bright."

I couldn't see how an academic-oriented egghead would be of any help in the situation I was in, but I'd worry about it later. I sat on the table, suddenly aware that I was

more tired than I had realized and that I couldn't stand my aching head much longer without some rest. I closed my eyes. If Gates or Sims had walked in at that moment, I would have gone with them willingly for the promise of a bed and a few hours' sleep.

I heard her chuckle. "Some kidnapping. I could walk out of here right now and scream for the police."

I opened one eye. "You missed that chance. Right now I need a place to hide out. It will be dawn soon and I can hardly go roaming around."

"Why not stay here? I doubt if anyone will come back, and it's the last place they'll look for you."

I looked at her admiringly. It was something that hadn't occurred to me. "There is one slight problem," I said. "What am I going to do with you?"

"I thought I could go to town and see what is going on."

"What makes you think I would let you go?"

"You need help and I'm the only one available."

"Just why should you do all this?"

"You seem like a nice guy even if you do need a haircut. I think you're innocent. And then, as I told you before, I'm a reporter and you're a good story."

She was right. I'd be picked up sooner or later, but before that time I needed someone working on my side. Then again, if she decided to turn me in, there was little I could do about it. She had sensed from the start that I wouldn't and couldn't hurt her.

"Okay," I said. "You can go. I'll stay here. If you come back with the sheriff, I'll understand."

"Not the sheriff," she said. "Maybe Allen, but not the sheriff."

I used the flashlight to light her way out of the barn and handed it to her at the door. "You'll need this more than I will."

The light bobbed across the barnyard and through the trees.

I felt my way back to the tack room, snuffed out the candle, stretched out on the makeshift table, closed my eyes and immediately fell asleep.

It must have been a footstep on the wooden floor of the barn that woke me sometime after dawn. The nap had done wonders. The tiredness was gone and the headache had almost disappeared.

The noise came again and I silently swung off the table. The tack room was a terrible place to be trapped and I cursed my stupidity. Other than the door, the only way out was the window, and that hadn't been opened in years. I

quickly moved to a spot beside the door and waited, Gates' gun in my hand.

The noise became cautious footsteps coming closer, and then into the tack room stepped a tall, thin and erect young man with long black hair, a full beard and heavy spectacles.

"Mr. Long?" The voice was soft and questioning.

Deciding against using the gun, I reached out and clamped an arm around his throat. He gasped once and stood absolutely still. I eased the pressure.

"Eve Croydon sent me," he croaked. "I'm Allen Mercer."

I let him go and he stood there smiling and massaging his throat. "She didn't tell me you were so big, Mr. Long."

Beneath the beard, he had a peculiarly broad face, the eyes behind the spectacles unusually sharp and penetrating. I decided I wouldn't like to have him teaching me anything.

He looked down at the gun in my hand. "You certainly don't need that."

"I might," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought I might help."

"What do you expect to do for me?"

"Persuade you to give yourself up."

I slipped the gun back into my waistband. "I'd rather that you helped me find the two men that were here."

He waved. "We must face facts, Mr. Long. There is just your word that there were two men."

"In other words, you don't believe me."

He shrugged. "It's a rather far-fetched story."

I pulled out the glassine envelope and pills. "What about these?"

"Eve mentioned them. They could mean nothing." He extended a hand. "Suppose you give me the gun, Mr. Long. I'll drive you to town."

"Did Eve send you out here with this idea?"

"I didn't tell her what I had in mind. She is under the impression I am going to take you to my apartment and hide you while we work out some sort of plan, but that would be harboring a fugitive. If I were to do that, Eve and I would both get into trouble. I'm sure you wouldn't want that for her."

He was right, but my stubborn streak made me pretend to think it over, then I handed him the gun.

"I'll take the envelope, too, Mr. Long."

I shook my head. "No deal. I give that to my lawyer when I get one. He can follow it up."

He reversed Gates' gun so that it

was pointed at me. "I'm afraid I must insist."

Stupefied, I stared at him.

He motioned with the gun. "Ahead of me, Mr. Long, into the barn. Large as you are, I would find you difficult to miss even though I am not accustomed to handling one of these."

I didn't argue. Those eyes had a faint maniacal glow that I didn't like. I stepped out into the barn but didn't go very far. He had lied beautifully about the two men. He didn't have to help me look for them. They were standing under the loft, one big and one small, just as I remembered, but I hadn't had time to see the ruthlessness in their faces.

"Meet Polo and Little Pete," said Mercer. "Polo is the large gentleman. He was quite sure you were dead. Imagine his surprise when he found out you were not only alive but had been taken into custody and then escaped; and imagine his satisfaction when I told him where you could be found."

"Eve thought there was something more to it than two men in a deserted barn," I said. "I should have listened to her. Did she know?"

"Of course not," he said impatiently. "She is not aware of my activities."

"Some people win million-to-one

lotteries," I said. "I had to win you. How do you fit in? Trying to get rich peddling dope to students?"

He smiled. "Nothing like that, Mr. Long. If you were hoping for a big dope ring, I'm afraid I must disappoint you. As a sociologist, I felt there was an area of drug culture that should be explored. Polo and Little Pete agreed to supply me."

"You'll have to explain that to me."

"A sociological experiment, Mr. Long. I simply made narcotics available to students who wanted them; keeping appropriate case histories, of course. Narcotics is one of our largest social problems, you know. The gathering of facts and careful evaluation are a duty."

"You're a damn fool," I told him. "You have ample material in any city. You don't have to create your own."

"I am not interested in random sampling."

The eyes were gleaming now. I really didn't understand what he was talking about, but what it boiled down to was that he had been deliberately providing drugs for students, studying their reactions and keeping records. I wondered how someone like Eve Croydon got tangled up with a nut like this.

"Feeding drugs to students is hardly part of an accepted curricu-

lum anywhere, Mercer," I said.

"Only because I have narrow minds to contend with. I believe people should be allowed to do as they please without harassment. There is much to be said for drugs, Mr. Long. They free the mind and spirit, and I have the records to prove it."

"Do your records also show how many students you are destroying?"

The question didn't bother him. "Some weak people always fall by the wayside, Mr. Long."

"They don't require your assistance."

He shrugged. "Students would acquire the drugs on their own. I prefer to offer them under controlled conditions." The eyes gleamed again. "They are the key to a new world, a creative new society."

"Are you doing the drug scene yourself?"

"Of course. Personal experience is an obligation."

"I knew something must have scrambled your brains. If they ever found out at the university—"

"I am not ready for that," he interrupted. "That is why you are a problem. If Polo and Little Pete are picked up, I'm afraid they will not keep silent about the recipient of their illegal product. Of course, they have their own reason for getting rid of you."

"What are your plans, Mercer?"

"You go with Polo and Little Pete. I don't care what they do with you. I don't even want to know."

Polo and Little Pete stepped forward. Little Pete had a gun now and I was sure of one thing: I had no intention of going with them. I could tie them in to the one killing, so they had nothing to lose by being responsible for another.

They were in front of me. Mercer was close behind me, his revolver pressed against my back. We were all under the hayloft because Polo and Little Pete had waited at one side of the barn. If we had been in the open space in the center there would have been little I could do, but standing there I remembered leaning against the stud supporting the hayloft and Chet's remark about Samson.

I had my Philistines now.

I whirled, knocking Mercer's gun aside and dove for the stud, hitting it with my shoulder and taking it out cleanly. The heavy loft gave a little groan, hesitated and started to sag.

The three of them forgot about me as they stood frozen for a moment, staring up at the loft. Then with a roar the loft swung down, burying them under the wooden platform and bales of hay, and as it came down I rolled frantically to get clear, the spilled hay covering

me, blotting everything from sight.

Dust rose in a huge cloud, choking me as I fought my way free and staggered out of the barn. There was a fierce pain in my shoulder where I had hit the stud, my head ached again, and I was conscious of muffled cries coming from under the collapsed loft.

Outside, the morning air was clear and sweet and I took a deep breath.

There was a car in the barnyard. I could go for help or go back into the barn and try to dig out the three of them by myself, but hearing the sounds from under the fallen loft, I knew I couldn't go away and leave them.

I went back.

Using my one good arm, I had pulled a bloody Polo clear when I heard another car pull into the barnyard. I stood in the doorway of the barn, watching a puzzled Sims and Fred walk toward me. I didn't even get the time to wonder what they were doing there. They disappeared in a gray haze and I collapsed.

The hospital was cool and quiet when I awoke. The clean sheets felt good and I stretched luxuriously, feeling very hungry and aware of a dull ache in my shoulder. My arm was in a sling and a tightness made me investigate my head. It was

bandaged—but I still had my hair.

A nurse looked down at me, smiled slightly and left the room. Fred, Sims and Eve Croydon came in; Fred looking pleased and shaking his head, Sims serious and Eve a little worried.

I smiled at her reassuringly. Her face brightened.

"Polo is alive and he told us all about it," Fred said. "The other one is dead and that Professor Mercer is in bad shape."

I leveled a long look at Eve Croydon. "I'm sorry."

"So am I," she said softly. "Allen was always nice to me. I never knew."

"You sure evened the score for Chet," Fred said.

"That doesn't bring him back," I answered quietly.

There was a long silence before Sims cleared his throat. "We apologize for the inconvenience we caused you, Mr. Long. We did what we thought was right. There was no excuse for Gates. He's been suspended. You can prefer charges if you wish, but there's the matter of kidnapping Miss Croydon."

"What kidnapping?" asked Eve.

Sims sighed. "That takes care of *that*." He moved toward the door. "I have to look in on the other two."

I watched him go, thinking that at least he tried to do his job well

and I couldn't fault him for that.

I turned to Fred. "You took care of Chet?"

He nodded. "All arranged."

"Did they tell you when I can get out of here?"

"In a day or two. You have a broken collarbone and a slight concussion."

"One thing I can't figure out. What brought you and Sims out to that barn?"

"You weren't around so, inasmuch as I had nothing to do, I decided to see if I could repair the Cessna while waiting for word. Since I didn't know where it was, the sheriff offered to drive me out there. We certainly didn't expect to find you."

I pointed at my arm. "Who's going to fly the Cessna out?"

"I'll do that. You can't fly with

one arm, but you can drive, so I'll leave my car here for you."

I thought of how it had all started, and of Chet, dead on the floor of the tack room for no reason, and my thoughts must have shown on my face. Eve, probably thinking about Mercer, didn't look too happy either.

Fred made an obvious effort to lighten the mood in the room. "Hey," he said, grinning. "Our deal still stands. You get your hair cut before you come back."

I turned to Eve. "Do you think he's right?"

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "You could do with a little trim."

I groaned, but all these two were asking in return for their unquestioned faith was a simple haircut.

It seemed like a rather small price to pay.



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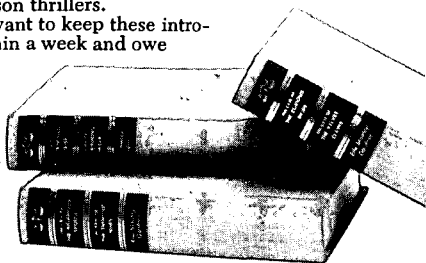
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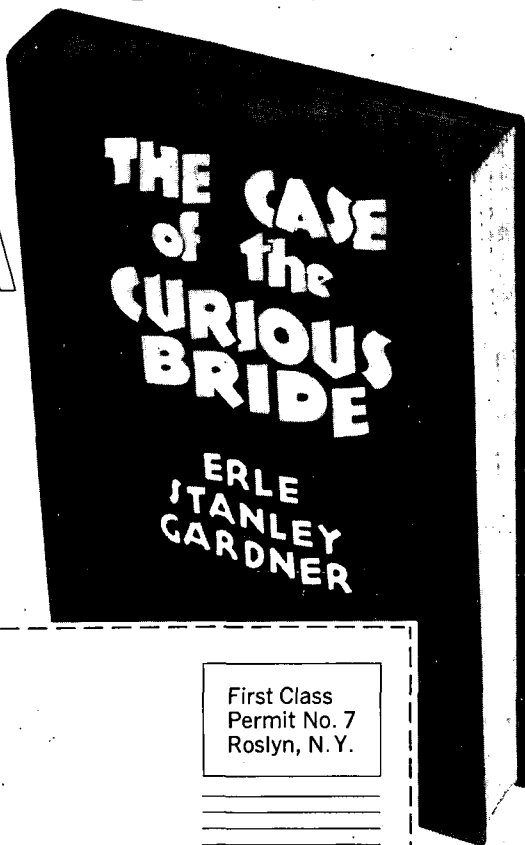
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